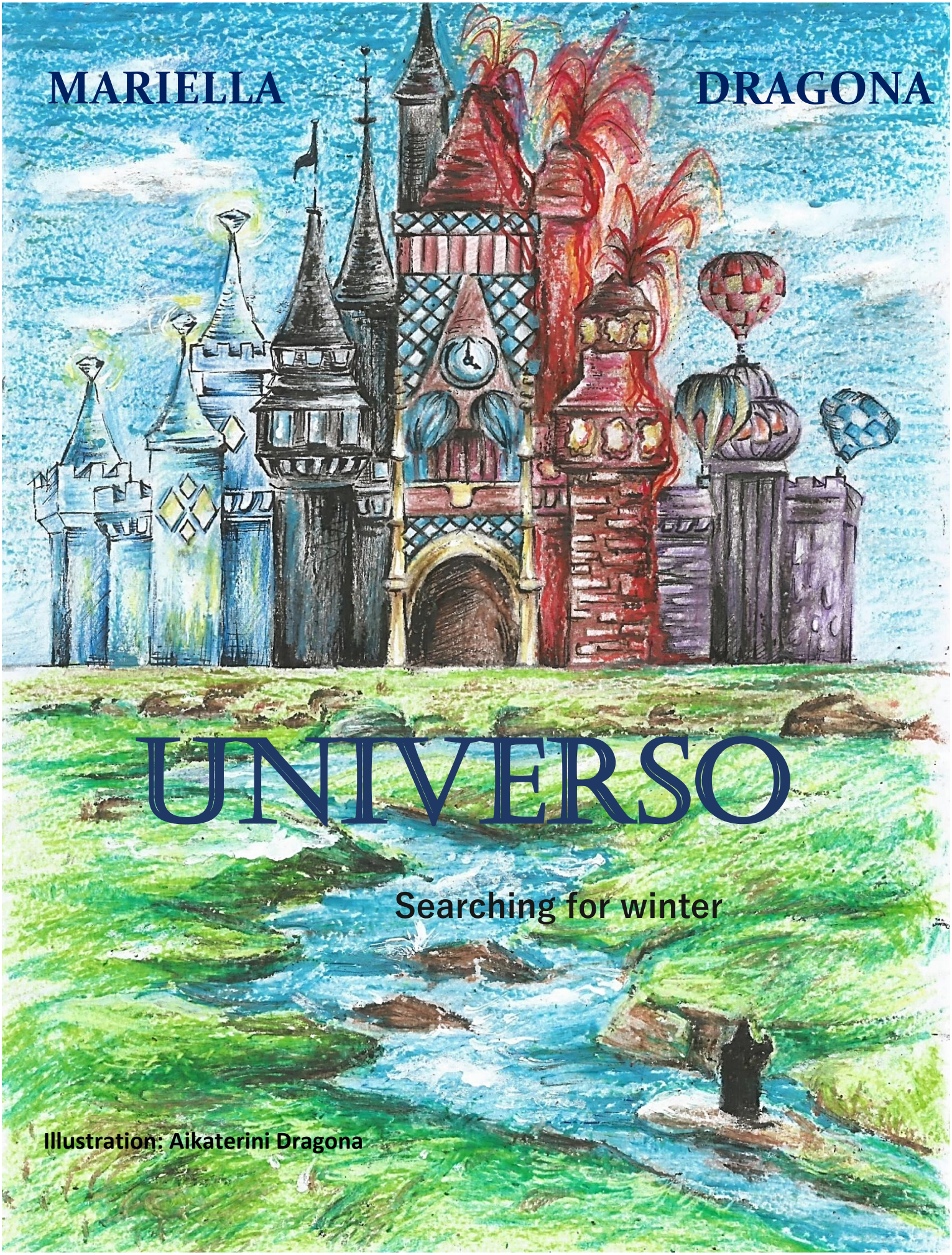

MARIELLA DRAGONA

UNIVERSO

Searching for winter

Illustration: Aikaterini Dragona

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Book 1 of the Universo series

All images as well as the cover are original works of Illustrator Aikaterini Dragona, while the map of Universo was created through the Inkarnate application. AI was not used in the creation of the book.

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Author's Bio

Mariella Dragona was born in 2000 in Greece. She studied Tourism Management at the University of Patras and received her Master's degree at the same university. She knows four foreign languages so far (English, German, Russian, Spanish). She is currently studying at the Pedagogical Department of Primary Education of the University of Ioannina and at the Postgraduate Program in Educational Unit Management of the IHU. From a young age, she had an aptitude for foreign languages and loved to travel. She works as an Adult Educator in SAEK.

She knows how to play the piano and has a black belt in tae kwon do. Her big dream, however, since her student years was to become a writer. Shortly before completing her studies, and during the Covid-19 period, she decided to write her own book. The idea of Universo appeared in her mind within a day, as she was reading a fantasy book (her favorite genre). She hopes you enjoy it and always remember: “Work hard in silence and let your success make the noise”.

@happilyever_after20

Illustrator's Bio

Aikaterini Dragona was born in 2003 in Greece. She is studying at the Department of Visual Arts and Art Sciences of the School of Fine Arts of the University of Ioannina. From a very young age she had a love for painting and developed her talent through her involvement with Hagiography in recent years. She also loves music and plays the guitar.

MARIELLA DRAGONA

UNIVERSO

Searching for Winter

BOOK I

Map of Universo

To my family with love.

Thank you for everything.

Central Heroes

Elli Lopez → *The main character of the book*

She is a 20-year-old girl who belongs to the Luminoso's tribe. She likes to read... a lot. She reads all kinds of books except thrillers. She is romantic and definitely wants a happy ending to her story. Oh, I forgot to mention! She has a hidden unique power.

Caroline Dragon→ *Elli's friend*

She is Elli's friend and 2 years younger than her, so she is like her little sister. She is sweet but also dynamic at the same time. She always makes Ellie smile with her carefreeness and jokes. She's also a party animal and she loves drawing!

Shawn Mason→ *Elli's secret love from Elementary School*

The charming, brilliant and talented writer who at the age of 20 has written the best novels, but no one agrees to publish them.

Daniel Dragon→ *Friend of Shawn and Brother of Caroline*

He loves his car and good food. He is a nerd and helps everyone with whatever they need. Everyone mocks him for his low height, but he always rises to the occasion.

Adrian Barlow→ *Opponent of the protagonist*

He is a 22-year-old boy and belongs to the Oscuros' tribe. He is ambitious, has a sense of humor and (unfortunately) is unimaginably narcissistic. All the girls of his tribe call him "Prince of the Oscuros".

Dylan Kale→ *Adrian's friend*

He is a calming force. His brotherly friend with Adrian and 1 year younger than him. He loves poetry and is therefore mocked by his friends, but he has courage and boldness in his life and he likes to stand out in his own way.

Sylvia Lucas→ *Strong ally*

She is a member of the Rubicundos and a worthy warrior. She loves animals and has a deer for company. The forest is her natural environment and she feels it as her home.

Dora Espinoza→ *The sweetest of the group*

She belongs to the tribe of Grisáceos. She is tiny and loves to sit by the fireplace with her grandmother and sew. She hates loneliness but she is also self-sufficient. She always wants to have the last word in the conversation and she is very stubborn but everyone forgives her in the end. She is so sweet after all.

Tribes

Luminosos→ The guardians of the diamond (the strong as rocks), they live in Lumina. They can create unbreakable diamond swords as if by magic, and they also possess retractable stalactites that are incorporated into their hands (from fingers to elbows) like armor.

Oscuros→ The guardians of the black stone (ability to be invisible in the dark), they live in Oscura. They can appear and disappear in seconds having the darkness as their ally; the power they possess may seem meaningless, but in combination with their fighting skills... they are invulnerable.

Grisáceos→ Quartz guards (the healers), they live in Grisa. They are the doctors of Universo and they are the ones who keep the balance between the tribes. With one touch they can cure even the most incurable disease or worsen the patient's condition if this becomes necessary.

Rubicundos → The guardians of the ruby (burn like lava), they live in Rubina. They are volcano-people; they can create hot lava balls, while they remain intact at high temperatures; whenever they want to, they can raise their body temperature, and anyone who dares to touch them gets severe burns.

On the shoulder of the uniform of each tribe is written its badge, which is the stone that represents each one of them.

Fantastic Beasts

Daroulis →Adrian's pet

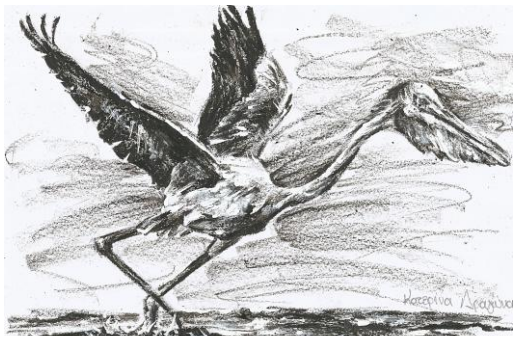
It has huge wings, a crow-like beak, a monkey tail, a bear's body and it sounds like a lion.

Erizos →Annoying roommates

They are like hedgehogs, they enjoy being tucked under the tiles and making holes in the roofs.

Nymphs →Inhabitants of the rivers

White fairies small as miniatures that possess the power of golden dust and they live in mushroom houses.



Pelican Rosados →Born for long flights

Junction of pelican and flamingo.

Piranias →The deadly jaws

Junction of goldfish and piranha.

Kuervos →Good friends

Junction of crow and parrot.

Wildcat and Pero →The Guardians of the House

The peros especially sound differently depending on the occasion.

Bestias →The followers

They are tall and they have ram horns, their whole body is sculpted by cobwebs, and from their chest emerge claws.

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Songs

- **Prologue:** Let it snow by Dean Martin
- **Chapter 1:** How Long by Charlie Puth
- **Chapter 2:** I Knew You Were Trouble by Taylor Swift
- **Chapter 3:** August by Taylor Swift
- **Chapter 4:** Gotta Be You by One Direction
- **Chapter 5:** Señorita by Shawn Mendes, Camila Cabello
- **Chapter 6:** Break Free by Ariana Grande, Zedd
- **Chapter 7:** Irresistible by Demi Lovato, Fall Out Boy
- **Chapter 8:** Wake Me Up by Avicii
- **Chapter 9:** The Climb by Miley Cyrus
- **Chapter 10:** Unstoppable by Sia
- **Chapter 11:** Don't Go Yet by Camila Cabello
- **Chapter 12:** Worldwide by Big Time Rush
- **Chapter 13:** The Greatest by Sia
- **Chapter 14:** Human by Rag'n'Bone Man
- **Chapter 15:** Fairytale by Alexander Rybak
- **Chapter 16:** Somebody to You by Demi Lovato, The Vamps
- **Chapter 17:** Woman Like Me by Little Mix, Nicki Minaj
- **Chapter 18:** Don't Start Now by Dua Lipa
- **Chapter 19:** Bad Habits by Ed Sheeran
- **Chapter 20:** Kiss You by One Direction
- **Chapter 21:** Head Above Water by Avril Lavigne
- **Chapter 22:** Stitches by Shawn Mendes
- **Chapter 23:** Black Magic by Little Mix
- **Chapter 24:** SNAP by Rosa Linn
- **Chapter 25:** Sucker by Jonas Brothers
- **Chapter 26:** Believer by Imagine Dragons
- **Chapter 27:** You Belong With Me by Taylor Swift
- **Chapter 28:** Nothing Breaks Like a Heart by Miley Cyrus
- **Chapter 29:** Story of My Life by One Direction
- **Chapter 30:** Break My Heart by Dua Lipa

SONGS ADEQUATE FOR ALL THE CHAPTERS

- River by Ochman
- Treat You Better by Shawn Mendes
- Baila Conmigo by Selena Gomez, Rauw Alejandro
- De Una Vez by Selena Gomez
- Levitating by Dua Lipa
- Love Again by Dua Lipa
- Corazón by Maluma
- Pa' Ti + Lonely by Maluma, Jennifer Lopez
- What Makes You Beautiful by One Direction
- You & I by One Direction
- Love Story by Taylor Swift
- Over And Over Again by Nathan Sykes
- Problem by Ariana Grande, Iggy Azalea
- Liar by Camila Cabello
- Shameless by Camila Cabello
- Stay by Kid Laroi, Justin Bieber
- River by Bishop Briggs
- Wake Me Up by Avicii
- Sarà perché ti amo by Esteriore Brothers

- Rewrite The Stars by Anne-Marie & James Arthur

Prologue

It's Christmas. It hasn't snowed for 20 years. I have never seen the white ice, the soft flakes and the result of a heavy snowfall in my life. I am content only with the description of my father, which even today remains the same... "*I've missed that white wave that I remember from a young age covering everything. The bitter cold, the children playing and making snowmen, the songs, the joy... If only there was a machine specially built to relive the best moments of your life. Every year on Christmas Day the snow fell in flakes outside my window. I would wake up, jump out of bed and run down the stairs and grab my jacket and go outside to touch it. I still remember my mother yelling at me that I would get cold and get inside quickly. I always told her the same thing: "Don't worry mommy, I'm not going to get cold, the snow is my friend and she's watching over me." And I really never had a cold while spending time with her."*

As white as the foam of the sea it reminded him of our former queen, Helada. She was gorgeous with her blonde hair standing out through the white cape she wore constantly and was her favorite. I wanted so much to be like her! Even though we were different in appearance, as a little Elli, I often dreamed of being at the palace by her side and learning everything from her. But her story was so tragic that it still makes me shudder. She became queen at the age of 18 and managed with her kindness to unite the tribes for 7 years until... Dangerous weather phenomena appeared, father's beloved snow was lost, and with it every trace of peace. Everyone became aloof and wary. The tribes stopped visiting each other, and conflicts were a daily occurrence when members of different tribes intersected with each other. However, the death of our queen, after 3 years, brought concord, not in its former form, but at least with the fewest possible conflicts. The snow may not have returned, but father returned from his "special missions" and that alone makes Christmas my favorite holiday of the year.

Chapter 1⚘

I am on a snowy mountain peak. I see on the horizon the colors of the sky playing with on another and changing shapes. Blue, red, green, orange. They are so beautiful! I feel a serenity that only here I can feel. In the background I see my city, Lumina. It is in harmony with the landscape. Dressed in white with crystals, stalagmites and stalactites popping up from everywhere. The river Agua, which begins its journey from the top of Mount Dakota, separates the cities and forms the natural border between them. In the background I see the city of Oscuros. Oscura is as dark as its inhabitants. Everything is black: the houses, the streets and even the lights. As if a cloud is permanently parked above the city. In any case, we never had relations with its people, since they are the sworn enemies of the Luminosos, as our ancestors say. Further west is Grisa. Grisáceos are friends with everyone. It makes sense since they are the doctors of Universo. Whatever illness torments you; they will help you heal. Their city is gray with skyscrapers, balloons for the transportation of patients, but also with the best view to the sea. Opposite them is Rubina. This is where the Rubicundos dwell in their volcanoes. They prefer to be the neutral zone between us (the Luminosos) and the Oscuros. This characteristic makes them hated and loved, depending on the occasion, from both sides. I notice the slow flow of Agua; it slowly pours from the mountains to the cities and gives life to what it overtakes. It starts to snow, the water of the river begins to flow more threateningly, the air changes its course, everything gets dark, a shrill thunder is heard, and suddenly someone grabs me by the shoulders and throws me into the void. I wake up and all I remember is my voice sounding hoarse as I shouted for help.

🌹

"Did you see the same dream again?" Caroline asked me anxiously.

"Yes unfortunately," I replied.

"I can't understand what it might mean."

"What's certain is that I couldn't sleep well yesterday, so I won’t attend the party."

"What? Why? It's Christmas after all. Come, do me the favor. They will all be there. Even Shawn," Caroline tells me meaningfully.

Shawn, I thought, who doesn't *even* know my name although we are in the same class from the first grade. Either way, I don't love parties very much unlike Caroline. She doesn't miss a single one! This is the only point that we are different, otherwise we have so much in common that everyone thinks we are sisters.

"Well, I will come under one condition..." I told her.

"Yes, whatever you want will be done."

"We will not stay until the end and you will not force me to dance." I still remember the last time she forced me and I suffered a sprained ankle.

"Okay, we have a deal. Although those were two conditions!" she replied with her brightest smile. "The party starts at 10:00, we will go with Daniel, he will pick us up by his car. Nina, Mathias, Anastasia, Angelika and Thanos will come by their own car. Do you want me to invite Danae and Nikos too? Ok I'll call them. That's fine for now. In the evening I'll come by your house to select you a dress and do your make up because the truth is that you don't know anything about make ups and I'll tell Daniel to come by your house to pick us." I still can't believe how she speaks so fast and I still understand what she wants to say. I must have some charisma.

"Okay!" I say to her with a hasty smile. "See you then."

"Perfect, see ya," she told me, then hugged me and left.

I continued on my way home. The good thing is that I live two blocks away from Caroline and we can visit each other very often. What did I agree to again? Since I know I won't have a good time eventually....

On the way I stopped by all the shops and did a window shopping. I love so much this season... The lights and gifts are the only ones that have remained a tradition of Christmas. I stop in my tracks as a light pulls out of the corner of my eye. I turn and place my palm on the window of a shop, looking with wide eyes. In the center of its window I see a miniature of our city full of houses, stalagmites and stalactites, illuminated with lights in yellow color and it is so white like the snow. I spend a long time there observing the gentle movement of the flakes as they fall to the ground and listening to the train, connecting the cities of Universo, circling around the tiny Lumina. So magical! I wish I could really touch the snow someday.

A few Luminosos remain on the streets at this time seeking the warmth and safety (primarily) of their home. One of them almost runs past me, taking me out of the enchanting world I imagined being part of. I gasp scared, but he, not paying attention to me, disappears in seconds in the darkness of the night. Taking one last look at the artificial snow, I turn around and follow his example heading to my home. He's right, I should have already returned. Oscuros' attacks have become more frequent in recent days, and the truth is that I wouldn't want to run into an angry Oscuro at the moment. Isolated groups of young people caused minor damage to our properties, but the worst thing was that they attacked innocent people who were on the streets at that time. That alone infuriates me! There are some who claim to this day that we were the ones who stole the stones for our benefit, 20 years ago, on Christmas Day. How can they be so narrow-minded?

With these thoughts I arrive at my house after a while, I lock the door and I climb on my tiptoes the stairs to my room. Fortunately, no one notices me, so with quick movements I get ready and fall into my bed with relief. Nevertheless, today was a beautiful day. In the morning the whole family gathered at the fireplace and opened our gifts. They were a few, but unique, for each of us individually. Grandma was so pleased with the shawl that I got her that she wears it day and night. The best gift I got was, from my mom, a book I've long wanted to read. My joy as soon as I saw it was indescribable. I have a small library that I keep in alphabetical order the few books I have in my possession. How I wish I had a library up to the ceiling of my room, but I won't complain at all, it's just a dream. I see children who have half the possessions of me and they prefer a hot plate of food instead of a toy. Because the world war had these effects. Poverty and fear. An uncertain future. One day when I was 10 years old I asked my grandfather: "Grandpa, why do people outside shout and I hear so many thunderbolts?" and he replied "My child war is not a good thing, I wish you to live in times of peace and concord." We sat together by the fireplace and grandpa began to narrate the events to me.

"*It was Christmas. Everything was gorgeous. People danced in the streets, everyone was singing, exchanging gifts. Lights were everywhere, in all the cities, even in Oscura. Trips from city to city were frequent since there were blood ties with all tribes. Every year one of the cities hosted a big celebration and that year it was the turn of the Luminosos. Lights of all colors filled the whole city. The crystals of the*

houses changed colors depending on the time of day. Everything was magical. As if the whole planet was smiling. Universo as we know is spinning around Sol and that year there would be an eclipse. Only every 100 years there is an eclipse so that year was special. On Christmas Day all the tribes gathered in Lumina for the feast. Everyone wore their best costumes! The Luminosos, in the traditional uniform full of crystals, all-bright. Women with long dresses and elaborately trimmed hair. Elegant men accompanied them with pride. All the tribes brought gifts to the Luminosos as a sign of friendliness. The orchestra played traditional melodies and contemporary songs. Everyone was dancing and laughing. There was also a big amount of teasing between the tribes. After all, many families had been formed between the tribes and mentalities and customs were exchanged. The atmosphere was festive. Your grandmother and I danced like our lives depended on it and our laughter had filled the place. At some point I got tired and decided to say some anecdotes with two friends of mine from Rubina and Grisa. Your grandmother had two friends from Oscura and we were all teased by them. The speeches began at some point and the leaders of all tribes took the stage and said a few words. Fireworks began to fall after they finished and we all looked at the sky, the eclipse had begun. My lovely Elli, this moment was the best of my life, after my marriage to your grandmother of course. This one moment. Then it prevailed... chaos. Lightning began to fall, thunder was heard from everywhere, people began to run, shout. Suddenly the army of the Oscuros appeared in their black uniforms, one moment invisible and in the other visible. On the opposite side, our army appeared. White, with diamonds covering like armor the uniform of the fighters. It didn't take long for the Rubicundos army to come along, with their bright red uniforms holding the flames on their bodies without burning them. And at last the Grisàceos with their grey uniforms ready to cure any injuries. Why should anyone be injured, I thought that moment. Why did the army arrive anyway? We all hid wherever we could because we understood that something bad was going to happen.

Then the commander-in-chief of the Oscuros said: "Traitors you have stolen our Black Stone, the most important symbol of our city. That's why you're going to pay dearly."

Our commander-in-chief replied with wonder: "We did not steal anything." and went on to say with anger, "Instead you stole our Diamond under the guidance of the Rubicundos."

Then, full of anger, the commander-in-chief of the Rubicundos replied: "I think you have all lost your sanity. You all stole our Ruby."

The Grisáceos also replied that their own symbol, the Quartz, was missing too. The Oscuros began the battle believing firmly that the culprits for the whole situation were the Luminosos. The Rubicundos and Grisáceos followed and put the blame on each other. There was a great battle and upheaval as everyone blamed everyone. But the biggest battle happened in the end between us and the Oscuros. The Grisáceos understood that there was no point in continuing even though they were fearless because of their ability to heal. The Rubicundos on the other hand, were already counting many dead people because of the Oscuros, decided to retreat. The battle between us and the Oscuros was fierce. Many good men perished that day and this conflict continued for 2 years. The result was that the culprit was not found and the 4 symbols of the cities remained missing even today. The misery and hunger that followed was indescribable. Fortunately, with slow pace but steady steps, we managed to get all the cities back on their feet. The coldness between the tribes, however, remained as did the repeated glimpses of hatred that passed down from generation to generation. But something else more important happened that day. Something that had an impact on all the cities of Universo....Winter was gone. That is, the snow, the joy, the life, the concord, the celebration. What winter stands for. The need for warmth among our fellow human beings." As soon as my grandfather finished his naration, I wondered where the 4 symbols were and who took them. Where did winter go after all?

"Come on, my Elli, hurry up we will be late," Caroline shouted at me from the base of the stairs. I took one last look at the mirror and descended as carefully as I could with the heels that Caroline lent me. But how do people walk on them? I painstakingly went down the stairs and Caroline continued peculiarly staring at me.

"What? Crap?" , I ask her.

"The blue dress highlights wonderfully your eyes my love. And no, you're a goddess."

I rolled my eyes in protest but I didn't speak. We greeted my parents and grandparents and got out of the house. Daniel and his friends were already outside the house and waiting for us. We greeted the children and got into the car with Caroline as always being effusive with all the friends. I, on the other hand, as Daniel started the car, began to observe the buildings and the people outside the window. Everything is so serene and quiet. Very quietly indeed, for such a day. The lights begun to go out as it got dark and the few people still on the street were entering the warmth of their homes. I take a shaky breath. I wonder how my parents let me go out at such an hour. Father in particular was very happy that I decided to finally go to a party. I again I'm not at all...

We finally arrived at the school of Caroline, where the Christmas party is taking place today and where I shouldn't even be. We all walked in together and there was too much noise. Everyone danced, drank and talked happily. As if the world outside didn't affect them at all. As if they lived in a special place of their own. Caroline naturally began to become the focus of partying and attention; she is so unique and beautiful when she dances. And of course, I went to the counter with the "aperitifs". I filled my plate with the most delicious and good-looking foods and I sat in a corner watching the people around me dancing. Another 2 hours and I will be in my house, covered in my blanket, hugging my favorite book. At some point I felt a shadow above me, I lifted my gaze and saw Shawn. What do I do now? I was with my mouth full with... nor do I know what.

"Hey!" he tells me with a smile. I shake my head until I manage to shallow the bite I have in my mouth. What a shame! He takes a chair and sits next to me. Oh boy what am I doing now?

"You don't really like parties, right?" he asks me.

"It's not my favorite pastime," I reply with indignation and after I had hardly eaten a tiny piece of a finger food. What exactly is going on right now? Am I in a dream? Is Shawn talking to me? Something is telling me right now but all I hear is my inner voice screaming. He is waiting for an answer, obviously, because he looks at me with wonder.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you with such loud music," I answer him.

"Yes, I asked you what you love doing other than being at boring parties," he replies with his glittering smile. *Say something clever,* my inner voice advises me.

"I read books," I reply. *Yes, that was too clever*, I was informed by my inner voice. Thanks for the encouragement inner voice...

"Ah a bookworm, just who I've been looking for," Shawn tells me laughing sweetly. "Would you like to read any of mine? Unfortunately, I haven't received a positive response from a publishing house yet, so I'll give you a copy of my own."

"It would be my pleasure," I reply to him with as much enthusiasm as I could show to a man. Inner voice were you saying something? I said from within and smiled.

"Well? I know my next question won't be a pleasant one, but do you want us to dance?" he asked me, offering me his hand. *NOOO.*

"Yes, of course," I reply. *But what are you thinking? You're a mess in dancing*. We got up and headed to the center of the dance floor. I looked anxiously at Caroline who winked at me with meaning. Ahh, all this mess is her own achievement. Thanks Caroline! We started dancing to the rhythm of the music. I guess I was doing well because I hadn't stepped on him, at least yet. Really now this is perfect. *Ok Elli calm down. Smile.* He smiles at me too. I feel like we are the only ones on the dance floor. I look at his beautiful brown eyes and notice that he is looking at me differently. With interest? Ah everything is made as if in a fairy tale.

"I hadn't noticed your eyes before. They're so special and... beautiful." Nice, I'm blushing now.

"Thank you so much. And yours are-" I don't have time to finish my sentence because, in the reflection of his eyes, I see a creature flying towards us at high speed. I bend down and pull Shawn down with me.

"What is happeninig?" Shawn asks me full of agitation. Seeing my frightened gaze, he lifts his head and sees the same monster that has paralyzed me right now. "What is this?"

"I don't know," I answer him in shock. There was a big fuss in the hall, everyone was shouting and running towards the exit of the school. Shawn, me, Caroline and the rest of the gang hid under the tables. The creature flew with its huge wings filling the hall. He had a beak like a raven, a monkey tail and a bear's body. He sounded like a lion and flew over our heads without making an attack. I've never seen such a monster in

my life before. Suddenly from the open windows of the school appeared some shadows. I don't know if someone else saw them in the panic, but I noticed them appearing and disappearing. Through the shadows, a cheerful laughter was heard and a voice saying:

"So, guys what do we have here? It seems that Daroulis found his new meal." And through the shadows appeared a tall boy in an arrogant style along with a group of 10 other black-clad people.

"It seems we're going to have a great time tonight." ,he says, scanning the space with his gaze. His eyes lock with mine and he winks.

"A very good time, indeed."

Chapter 2⚘

The eerie silence that followed was brief, as those Luminosos who had practiced the art of war already had crystals in their hands and were in battle positions. Strange as it may sound, I am one of them with the knowledge that my father has delivered to me. Fortunately, the younger ones managed to escape having emptied the room for almost half of the people. The Oscuros are now looking at us with a challenging look. At some point, Thanos shouts, "Don’t you have anything better to do on Christmas Day?"

One of the Oscuros replies with derision, "But we came to give you our gifts, and you welcome us with such loathing?"

"Calm down Tom you will scare the ladies," says the leader, probably, of the gang looking at me again. My anger is indescribable. Not only had they spoiled the party, but also the perfect atmosphere that existed between Shawn and me. They thought that we were afraid of them too!

"Why don't you empty the place, so you don't get an accident and cry afterwards?" I say urgently.

"Ahh this nice lady here knows well manners. I think we will get along very well," the leader says with a smile.

"You're going to leave her alone," Shawn says in anger... Perfect I blushed again.

"Why don't you come to show me how, diamond kid?" replies the arrogant Oscuros. Daniel made the first move by throwing the first crystal towards the bully who spoke at the beginning, Tom. The Oscuros came towards us but in the room there was little light and this made our position difficult; with the knives in their hands they had the lead but also with our diamonds we "cut" them off. Battle cries were heard everywhere. It reminded me of the "Great Battle" narrated to me by my grandfather. Shawn had defeated two Oscuros but had been wounded in the arm. His friend, Daniel, was fighting very well for his height I have to say. I, on the other hand, didn't even have a scratch, which I cannot say about the two Oscuros on the floor in front of me. I lift my gaze again full of adrenaline and observe in distancing myself the scene unfolding around me. Caroline, although small, applies the moves I taught her, making me proud. Shawn fights like a pro and makes me smile when he manages to

injure the arrogant Oscuro. He is so beautiful in his armor made of sheathed crystals! But my eyes like suddenly can't focus on one point. I feel like I'm seeing stars. I blink them many times and through the fog of the bodies I notice a faint glow at a distance of one meter from me, suspended. As soon as I start to head towards it... it disappeared. Strange. He was not an Oscuros because he would have reappeared. Did someone else see it too?

Then, an urgent voice cuts through the darkness: "Enough is enough."

I turn around and see the leader of the Oscuros team boiling with anger. Shawn had injured him in the thigh and blood was gushing from the wound.

"That won't end here diamond kid." ,he says with clenched teeth.

"I think it just did." ,Shawn says with the same anger. And so, like a torque of wind the Oscuros disappeared.

"Are you all okay?" I ask anxiously. Tables were scattered and broken in the room, everyone's clothes were torn, a few were bleeding but had no serious injuries. Fortunately, the ambush had no casualties. I ran and hug Caroline. She was safe and sound.

"We're all good," Shawn replied. "And you?" he says anxiously.

"I'm fine," I reply and Caroline smiles full of meaning. I was barely able to contain my laughter. As we tidied up the place, a chatting was heard in the silent room.

"I can't understand what the reason for the ambush was?" asked Anastasia with wonder.

"They wanted to spend some quality time," Thanos replies.

"Too bad though because it was a very good party," says Caroline with sadness.

"Don't worry I'm sure you'll attend countless more parties in your life," I tell her with a smile while Caroline prods me with her elbow. When we finally finished cleaning the school and it took a more decent form we started to leave; we greeted the children and headed to Daniel's car.

"I would love to continue the conversation we had," Shawn tells me, catching me up.

"I would like it too," I reply shyly. "Do you want help with your hand?" I said to him as I noticed that he started bleeding again.

"No, I'm fine," he replies and acts as if he hadn't even noticed he was wounded.

"Good night then," I tell him looking him in the eyes.

"Good night," he replies with a smile. "Daniel, see you tomorrow," he says as Daniel passes by.

"Of course bro," he replies and gets in his lovely red car. As we depart I greet Shawn through the window and he replies with a wink. I hope that my eyes did not transform into butterflies, I think as we leave.

"Good night then," says Caroline in a dreamy tone after a while.

"You arranged that. Right?" I ask looking at Caroline and Daniel.

"Maybe I told him a few words," Daniel said. "Since he broke up with his girlfriend, after a long time, it's a shame that you're both single."

"Thank you," I say with gratitude.

"That's why friends are for my love," Caroline tells me with a kiss. As we passed through the deserted dark streets of Lumina, I wondered why the Oscuros raided in the end, just for fun? What was that glow that appeared in front of me? Do I really have a chance with Shawn after all?

I woke up in the morning very happy because of yesterday's events with Shawn but also because the nightmare did not visit me again. I ate my breakfast and went out for a morning walk. The morning air is so refreshing. The city had also begun to wake up and the parks were filled with morning walkers, some with their dogs, others jogging and others, including me, walking slowly enjoying the day. The smell of the recently watered park, the birds chirping, the fish in the fountain that compete about their food, the so beautiful plants in bloom. Everything leads to the conclusion that we are going through a beautiful spring. Yet it is still winter... I sit on a bench with my book and a hot chocolate in hand. I read with longing, as it’s the book my mother bought me and I have long wanted to read it. A very interesting book indeed. The sounds are isolated around me. It's just me and my book. But what a wonderful feeling! You live a life and books give you millions of new ones. One moment you can become a pirate on a secret mission to find the treasure, the next a princess in search of love, the next a witch with secret powers... Only someone who understands the power of books can

understand you. I turn the page of my book while reading about Cress's life in space, but a flash suddenly appears in the center of the book and makes me drop the chocolate I was holding in my left hand. I look at my book again with goggled eyes, thinking that maybe it was a play of the light. But lo and behold, the glow is real and approaching my face. I am so frightened that I furiously throw my book on the ground. Some passers-by look at me strangely now. That's perfect! I must have shouted something over my terror. I smile hurriedly at them and lift my book off the ground. Thank you so much "shine", now my chocolate is gone and the pages of my book are crumbled. I looked around but no one had noticed it or rather no one else was *seeing* the glow. I get up from the bench abruptly and put the book in my bag, a take two steps and it comes near me. What is happening? Did I lose my sanity? Was my mum right when she said that I'm insane because of the number of books I've read? At some point it flies in front of me and makes a move as if it wants me to follow it. Out of curiosity I changed my course and began to follow it. *Elli, have you lost your mind? Are you following something that you do not know what it is and no one else sees?* Quiet inner voice, maybe it wants to show me something important.

I walked, I took the train, I walked again... Everything seemed to indicate that the glow - which I decided to call Brillar- led me to Oscura. But why? I tried to look natural as I passed by dark shops, streets without light, people in wild form and sounds taken out of a horror movie. I shouldn't had come here. What if they recognize my origin? What if they attack me? What will I tell my parents next? Don't worry I came with company to Oscura. Truth be told, with a glow that only I can see. I'll be mistaken for crazy!

"Brillar make it worth it," I whispered and as if the glow heard me it stopped in front of me. We are at a dark entrance to a cave; the sign at the top reads:

'Danger, do not enter'.

"Let's hope I don't leave my bones in here," I said, taking a step forward. Brillar continued her journey through the cave, being the only source of light for me. The minutes that pass seem to me to be centuries. I am thinking of going back, it is not worth dying young. The floor is rough under the soles of my shoes. My hands touch the walls of the cave and fill with soil and stones.

"No, wait! Brillar, where are you going?" ,I say terrified as the glow accelerates and leaves me suddenly alone in total darkness. What do I do now? I try to adjust my eyes

to the lack of light. *Elli, don't panic. Go ahead, the cave is not very big anyway.* Let us hope so. Luckily I wear my favorite necklace and the fluorescent stone hanging from the black cord around my neck reduces the discomfort caused by the darkness. But suddenly as I walk I hear a *click.* I stop and listen. I already have my crystals ready in my hands. *Click*. And faster *click click.* I have taken two steps forward; nothing, I hear nothing; I am waiting. Again, i hear nothing. Ok I will live today. But something is thrown out of the shadows behind me and in seconds grabs me by the shoulders and closes my mouth before I can scream. I try with my crystals to fight back. I managed to do something because suddenly a stifling sound of pain was heard. I turn around and in the darkness a face began to appear. It is not possible. Not him again!

"Hey beautiful, I'm glad to see you again." I search for Brillar, but she has already disappeared. But how can I see him without the help of the glow; that answer will have to wait; I have other problems at the moment.

"What are *you* doing here?" I ask the arrogant leader of the Oscuros.

"I guess I have to ask this, since you are in my lair," he replies with complacency. Ah, how much do I want to erase that stupid smile from his lips, but he's probably right, what am I doing here?

"It’s none of your business," I say urgently. I turn to leave but he grabbes my hand and I with one movement turn my wrist and bring his hand behind his back.

"Don’t you dare to touch me again, am I clear?" I say to him through greeted teeth.

"Okay love relax. I don't fight with little girls anyway," he says struggling.

"Ah yes you're messing with little boys who are better than you," I say as I throw him down and head to the way back to the entrance of the cave.

"My name is Andrian if you ever look for me again," he shouts behind me and I felt his stupid smile stuck on my back.

"My name is Elli if your face is found on the floor again."

His laughter still echoes in my ears even though I have crossed almost all the way back. Thank goodness he didn't follow me, otherwise I would have applied every self-defense move my father has taught me. Brillar decides to appear just before the exit of the cave and brings with her another wave of rage on my part.

"We have a lot to say little meddler," I say.

I walk the road back to Lumina with a rapid step as it is already starting to dusk. I arrive at the station and with the ticket in hand I run to the train. The ticket collector stares at me as he cuts my ticket but doesn't say a word. How can the poor man say something, even I would not talk to me right now. I get in and sit in the third row as the train starts immediately. With the nerves I have, I don't know if I could wait for my departure from this place even for a minute longer. As I observe from the window of the train the trees changing shape due to the speed at which we were moving, the glow is lost. Oh, in fact, now that it's not in your interest, you're disappearing. I return home, after a few hours, quite tired and go up to my room to lie down. Luckily I had notified my parents that I was taking a long walk to the bookstore and not to worry because I would be coming home in the evening. I have 3 messages from Caroline but I don't have the courage to reply to them. I step into my warm covers and fall into a deep sleep.

I am on a snowy mountain peak. The wind caresses my hair, I catch the snow and happily throw it into the sky creating rain over my head. I smile broadly. The wind begins to rake everything that touches, Agua flows menacingly, a thunder, and someone lifts me by the shoulders. As soon as he throws me over the cliff I turn around and see a shadow without a face. A creature with the hood of his overcoat lowered so that the only things that appeared were his hooked claws.

~

I wake up bathed in sweat. I slowly get up from the bed feeling exhausted. I see this creature for the first time in my dreams. Could this be a sign? I hear the sound of messages on my cell phone. They're Caroline's again.

"How do you feel after last night?"

"Ellishawn ... Mmm sounds nice to me."

"Do you want us to go for a walk? I'm bored in the house."

---NEW MESSAGES---

"ELLI are you okay?"

"I'm worried, because you didn't respond to my messages."

"Sorry I had a hard day. Is the walk still a proposal?" I answer her.

"Of course, in ten minutes I'm there," she writes to me.

Within a short time we reached the park and I explained everything to Caroline. About Brillar, Adrian, the dream...

"So not only did you go to Oscura without me, but you also hit badly an handsome Oscuro?" said Caroline as I finished my narrative.

"From everything I told you this caught your attention?"

"But of course, my darling. Are such events not to distract me?" I rolled my eyes and exhaled indignantly. A thought came up in my mind then. Just as the glow disappeared, this creature appeared in my dream; there must be a connection to this.

"Come on, don't think about these things now. Tell me what we are going to do this weekend? Do you want us to go on an excursion?" I'm being asked by Caroline with new interest.

"Hello girls," Daniel says suddenly, coming towards us along with Shawn and Thanos.

"Hello," I say shyly.

"Hey brother. You came at the right moment. Here, we were arranging with Elli where to go on vacation at the weekend. What do you say?" Caroline said with joy.

"Are you inviting us too?" asks Shawn.

"Of course!" Caroline says.

"Perfect, I will tell Anastasia to come too, if you don't mind." ,says Thanos enthusiastically.

"Of course, you can invite her too," I said. "Do you want to go to Diamante which is also near the River Agua or do you want to go to Piedra which is on Dakota Mountain?"

"I'd prefer Diamante, which is next to the river, I like the water element more," says Shawn.

"And I love the water too." I say happy. In the end everyone agreed on the choice of destination and we arranged the time and place of the meeting. We greeted each other and continued on our way.

~

"We'll have a great time, I'm sure of it," says Caroline while we head to her house.

"Me too," I say with a smile, but my smile didn't reach my eyes as Brillar appeared suddenly behind Caroline.

"Caroline I'm a little tired I think it's best for me to go home. See you tomorrow morning, I will come by your house as we said."

"Yes of course, have a good rest," Caroline shouted at me, as I speeded up and followed the glow.

This time it led me to Rubina as it makes two swings over the city on the station map. I pull out my ticket, while the ticket collector is looking at me curiously. I lower my gaze and get on the train hoping he doesn't know my parents...

"You know, I'm still angry with you," I tell her at some point as soon as we arrive in town, but she doesn't pay attention to me, continuing her uninterrupted course. *You're angry but you keep following her.* It's like something is pulling me close to her. I don't know what, but I'll find out.

~

Although it's getting dark the city is brightened by the red and yellow color of the lava. As we enter deeper into the city I am overwhelmed by an unbearable heat due to the volcanoes and craters around me. People are so "warm". A group of children play with a flaming ball, as I pass by them and they all greet me with joy. The glow guides me through narrow alleys and streets. Between volcanoes and lava.

"Ouch," I say as a hot stone is thrown in my hand; I hold it and throw it back into the crater. Strange! Why did it not burn me? The route seems endless to me.

"Brillar when do we arrive? " I whisper to her. I get no answer. At some point we entered a forest so dense and dark that I thought I would never be able to find the way back. And then in the quiet of the forest a voice was heard. A voice so heartbreaking that it made the birds fly from their nests. And so suddenly the ground beneath my feet recedes and I begin to fall desperately searching with my hands for some support.

My eyes, however, focus on the sky where the moon, as if laughing at the predicament in which I find myself, decides to hide between the clouds, plunging me into darkness.

Chapter 3⚘

I open my eyes. I'm in the darkness. My hands are touching wet dirt and my head is heavy. I probably hit during the fall because my ribs and legs are injured. I get up slowly and try to calm my breath. I try to get up while touching my ribs. Brillar shimmers above my head and as she swings it's like she is asking me if I'm okay.

"I think I'll live." As soon as I manage to stand upright, I stretch the muscles of my body and try to comprehend where I was. I find myself under the forest's ground in what seems to be an underground tunnel. Brillar shimmers over my head and slowly guides me inside. Quiet prevails, but I can hear someone dragging something.

"Ah, I pray not to be mice," I say, closing my eyes tightly with loathing. I move forward with steady steps because Brillar's brilliance is scarce and I don't want to have uninvited guests on me. All around me there are wagons of old trains and rusty objects that suggest that once the place was an underground railway.

"Is anyone there?" I shout listening again that horrible sound. No one is here! How do I get out of here? A smell of stale air and sewage fills the air. I cover my nose with the fabric of my blouse. I go on and on.

"Help," a whisper.

"Where are you?" I shout in agony. I pass the last turn and see faintly in the dark a female silhouette on the ground. I get closer, with Brillar's light. She's a girl almost my age.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"I guess I twisted my leg by falling," the girl said. She is very beautiful, with crimson hair in curls which fall all the way to her back. I looked up, there was the same hole as the one I fell into. They probably were hunter traps.

"Wait, don't move, I can help you." I created specially shaped crystals and tied them around the girl's leg making a makeshift plaster. I helped her get up and she leaned on me.

"Oh thank you very much. I don't know what I would do if you didn't come. My name is Sylvia, by the way."

"I'm Elli. You're welcome. But it seems that we are both not very lucky today since we are trapped down here."

"Don't worry, I know the forest and its underground paths like my palm." We slowly started walking deeper. The light was dim and Brillar disappeared again, Sylvia created a lava ball in her hand that is now our only source of light.

"If I remember correctly at the next intersection on our right, we will find a ladder."

And indeed, as a miracle a ladder appeared that would lead us to the upper world. We climbed very slowly and after moaning and many pauses, we managed to reach the surface. I help her sit on the trunk of a tree and I sit across from her on a rock. What could a girl do alone in the woods at this time? What I also did, someone would answer.

"You're not one of our tribe, are you? Otherwise, I would remember you," Sylvia asks while we're resting.

"Well, no I am from Lumina," I reply to her with reservation.

"Okay don't worry. I don't keep the perceptions of my grandparents. The fairy tales we hear from a young age develop our thinking but do not necessarily shape our character... Oh here's my Pekenia." Under the moonlight appeared a fawn with small antlers and long thin legs, which came closer for Sylvia to caress.

"It's very sweet. Friend of yours?" I ask her with a smile.

"Yes from a young age she is always by my side. We can't do without each other... But you didn't tell me, what brings you into the woods at this time?" As she looks at me with her big blue eyes full of curiosity, I understand that it's time for me to leave.

"That's a very good question," I respond to her with concern. "But I can't give you an answer now because I'm already late and I have to go home. Are you sure that you're feeling better?" I tell her as I stand up abruptly.

"Thanks to you I'm feeling great and don't worry Pekenia knows the way back. Do you want us to exchange our phone numbers? I would love to see you again," she says happily without me being misunderstood by the change in my behavior after her question.

"Of course. And I was glad to meet you too." We exchanged our numbers and I said to her goodnight as I helped her mount the little fawn.

Why do I keep getting into trouble? Brillar may be something of my imagination. I must stop following her. Tonight could lead to tragedy, I think as I take the road back

home. And why does she led me to these places anyway? I've only had strange encounters and almost accidents in the last few days. There must be something I have to do. I text a message to Caroline to meet me tomorrow before the excursion because I have something important to tell her. One thing is certain. I will not make the next move on my own.

The day has come. Finally I will escape a little from this crazy adventure that I have become entangled in. I have already prepared my suitcase and I am waiting for Caroline to pass by my house. *Ring.* Oh just in time! I quickly go down the stairs, kiss the whole family and promise them not to disappear and that I will call them to let them know how I am. I get out of the house, hug Caroline and we set off for the park.

"Tell me everything in detail please. I didn't like this secretiveness yesterday at all," Caroline tells me with anger.

"Okay calm down I'll tell you what happened." And I began to recount to her yesterday's events. Throughout the narration, Caroline exclaimed in surprise and concern and then again in surprise. As soon as I finished Caroline was looking at me aghast.

"You don't have anything to say?" I told her cautiously.

"I have to say that you were wrong again that you didn't invite me to come with you. And secondly... I love the fawns. I definitely want to meet Sylvia," said Caroline with enthusiasm.

"You will meet her and you will come in the next excursion with Brillar."

"Perfect, I'm looking forward to it," she said clapping. I look at my watch and say with anxiety: "Oops we are late for our appointment."

"Ah yes." And so we accelerated our step up to the square. Our friends had already arrived and were waiting for us.

"Sorry we were late," says Caroline panting.

"Don't worry. We just arrived as well," Anastasia replies.

"Come on, little sister. How long did it take you to get ready?" Daniel says when he gets out of his car.

"Didn't you see that I left earlier? We had a serious discussion with Elli," says Caroline with anger. Ah Caroline have you lost your mind? I tried to nudge her to stop the conversation immediately.

"Are you okay? Has anything serious happened?" Shawn asks me with interest.

"Oh no, all good. Caroline is overreacting," I say and as I looked at her angrily she started smiling slyly.

"What do you say should we start?" asks Thanos with excitement.

"Yes. Let's all get in," Daniel replies with joy.

The trip is magical. The road is located parallel to the river Agua and its waters run gurgling creating an idyllic landscape combined with the rich foliage. I open the window, I feel the cool air caressing my hair, the birds have set up a concert on the trees. Nothing is going to spoil my mood.

Daniel is the one who drives with Caroline sitting in the passenger seat, Thanos and Anastasia sit to the left and Shawn sits next to them and all by chance cheek by jowl next to me. At some point our hands touch as I tried to get comfortable in my seat. I lift my gaze and look into his eyes. Then as if by magic Shawn smiles at me. With his familiar dazzling smile that makes the world around me just disappear. I feel my blush reaching my ears. Out of embarrassment we both turn our gaze in the opposite directions and try not to have too close contact. While all I wanted was the opposite.

The rest of the way we could hear Caroline complaining that she was tired or that her back hurts or asking when we would arrive or she was singing. At the same time Daniel was trying to ignore her or telling her with indignation that if she stopped talking, we would arrive faster. The four of us on the back seats, on the other hand, were talking about the activities we would do this weekend and that if the weather was favorable, we would hike by the banks of the river. And yes... After endless murmuring, singing, talking and shouting we finally arrived in Diamante. We settled in the hotel and went out for a walk.

~

Diamante is a village with few inhabitants and is famous for its dense forests and waterfalls. As we walk through the small alleys of the village, smells of freshly baked chestnuts and blooming flowers are mixed with sounds of traditional instruments

played in the taverns and the voices of children playing in the courtyards. We enter the shops and buy souvenirs for our families and continue our walk to the waterfalls.

We are all a group of friends and we chat happily as we see stalagmites popping up from all the roofs of the houses. They say that small Erizos, who are like hedgehogs, enjoy getting stuck under the tiles and creating holes in the roofs. So the inhabitants created a lever, which in the appearance of Erizos turns automatically releasing stalagmites that scare them and force them to return to the ground again. At the instigation of Caroline and mine we decided to head to the waterfalls. We both love to see the water fall like rain from the rocks.

While walking we took countless photos with Caroline performing the most imaginative poses. Arriving at the waterfalls we are all ecstatic by the spectacle that is in front of us. The water falls flow in the form of crystals and joins the river which, being hot, transforms the crystals into liquid form. Around the waterfall, nature thrives. There are small Nymphs, white fairies small like miniatures, who laugh and make circles around the water. The sunlight shimmers over the crystals and creates small rainbows. The blue sky is reflected on the smooth waters of the river and the pollen hovers like golden dust around us.

I sit by the bank of the river and imprint in my memory what I see in front of me. How is it that nature puts on her best clothing and people are not worthy of the circumstances? How can it be that there is discord and wickedness among people, while nature has found its balances? Can injustice be corrected and washed away like the waters of the river that end up in the sea? Can I do something about it myself? Then as if in response the glow appeared in front of me making two swings. I probably should become a spirit rapper, I thought as I got up from the rock and headed with Brillar to Caroline.

"Caroline, can you join me for a while? I want to show you something," I tell her with meaning.

"Yes, of course," says Caroline, understanding what I wanted her to do. "Guys we will be back in a moment."

"Don't go too far because it's getting dark and we have to return to the hotel," says Daniel.

"Yes, don’t worry. It won’t take long," I reply to him reassuringly.

"Did the brilliance appear again? Where is she? I want to see her too," says Caroline impatiently as we move away from the gang.

"Right now she's in front of you.”

"What? Really? I don't see her," replies Caroline searching.

"So my suspicions come true. She only appears to me."

"Ahhhh too bad... What is she doing now? Will she lead us to a new adventure?" says Caroline with new enthusiasm.

"It circles over your head," I say with a laugh.

"Really? Ah what a nice thing. Describe her to me. I'm curious to know what she is like.”

"Well, she’s blue, dazzling and has the form of a flame. I have noticed that when she wants to show me something she makes two swings up and down and when something is about to happen either bad or good her color becomes more intense.”

"How's she right now?" Caroline asks me in agony.

"She's doing two swings, so she probably wants us to follow her."

"Perfect, how exciting!" says Caroline with joy.

The route this time is more interesting because it is accompanied by a green landscape and the watercourses to follow us wherever we go. We pass rocks full of moss and trees that move their blanches rhythmically because of the cool afternoon breeze. Tree frogs roar menacingly, beavers carry small wood for their nests and Pelican Rosados (junction of a pelican and a flamingo) fly over us with enthusiasm. As we carefully move towards rough paths and hanging bridges I think about the events of the last few days. Do the places where Brillar leads me have any connection? The cave, the underground tunnel... Now where does she lead us?

The answer didn't take long to come as Brillar stops and her color becomes more intense. We are facing a natural "curtain". A climbing plant in four shades appears in front of us. White, black, red and gray. Its leaves come together and form a U in the center. We look at each other and as if in agreement we take together a step forward

putting aside the foliage. Behind the "curtain" emerges a new world. Fountains with colorful waters, trees in gray shades, fairies and elves, nymphs, forest animals, flowers of all kinds. It's like paradise!

"It’s so beautiful," Carolina says with goggled eyes.

"I didn't know there was such a place on Universo. It's like a fairy tale!" I answer her and I am full of joy. I make a full circle around myself taking a panoramic video with my phone, but as I finish rotating the camera drops to a point to my right that is not clearly visible. I put down my cell phone and get closer. Something gray is behind a foliage and I frown thinking about what it might be. It is the only place that has no life. Everything around him is dull. From the grass to the rocks that surround it. I push aside the leaves that cover it and what I see makes me lose my breath for a moment. It is a statue, with a hood, whose face is not visible. I get closer to him and look at it.

"That's it without a doubt," I say lost in my thoughts.

"That's what?" Caroline asks me.

"The figure of my dream," I answer her by coming out of my daydream.

"Look! There is an inscription on his feet." We both bend over and read what it says:

"Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore. At some point you will understand what you have lost and you will struggle to win it back. Only in this way you will be able to free yourself, otherwise I will crush you. The battle will be uneven but you will continue to fight. The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness."

"This is a very strange inscription. Although in general the statue does not match the landscape. It's a dissonance I would say," says Caroline puzzled.

"Brillar brought us here for some serious reason. This inscription must hide something important. This riddle is not accidental. It unlocks something," I say thoughtful.

"What is certain is that this place has remained hidden for a long time, since it has not been affected by the greed of people. It would become a very lucrative holiday resort if you think about it. But I think we are late again and Daniel will yell at me."

"Yes, we leave right now," I reply to her and take my cell phone out of the pocket of my jacket. I don't know what this riddle means yet but I will find the solution, I thought as I took a picture of the inscription and the landscape before it was lost

behind the curtain with the letter U. Like a theater curtain that remains closed just before the performance.

Chapter 4⚘

Time passes by slowly like a river drying up of water. The snow disappears, the laughter turns into tears, the winter disappears and I continue to fall into the void desperately looking for a foothold, a crack of hope... Waking up in the hotel room I don't feel the fear I felt the previous times when I had this nightmare. This time I wake up with a feeling of challenge and renewed courage. I will find the solution and free myself from my nightmares!

We all go down together for breakfast and start our last excursion to Diamante. It's chilly today, despite the sunny day, so we wear thick clothes, scarves and gloves. We all chat happily as we take our walk in the village. Not having understood how it happened, I was left alone behind the company, with Shawn next to me.

"I have something for you," Shawn says.

"Really? You didn’t have to," I answer him with surprise. He takes out of his bag a package wrapped in turquoise wrapping paper. He gives it to me and I am stunned. Is there a chance that he knows my favorite color? I look at Karolina who has moved on with the company. She turns around and winks at me. Oh Carolina.

"I don't know if you like it but I thought it would be more convenient for you to study. Come on, open it," he says impatiently. I tear the paper carefully and open the box that surrounded it. I cautiously put my hand inside and take out an item that I have always longed to buy. The label says: *Led Night Reading Book Lighting.*

“Whaaaatt? Thank you so much." Because of my joy I find myself in his arms in seconds. *Oops Elli calm down*, my inner voice advises me. Yes, that's right. I find my self-control and move slightly away from his arms. Did it seem to me or has he blushed? No, it’s definitely my imagination. I look at my gift again with sparkling eyes.

"I can't believe it. How did you know I needed it?" I tell him enthusiastically.

"Um, i imagined it. I'm glad you like it," Shawn says, touching his neck awkwardly. "I want to give you one more thing," he says, pulling a pocket book out of his bag. "It's my book. I’d love to hear your opinion, as I told you at the party." Shawn says with a lot of anxiety. I felt this anxiety of him running through me. I hadn’t realized that he cared so much about my opinion.

"Of course I will read it," I answer with indescribable joy.

"Hey guys, are we going to wait for you for much longer?" Thanos shouts at us.

"We're coming," I shout back at him. I put Shawn's gifts in my sack and we speed up our pace to catch up with the gang. As soon as we reach them, however, we keep a short distance from them. Shawn now walks awkwardly with his hands in his pockets and I with an indescribable warmth inside me. I take off my scarf and gloves. After all, the weather is not so cold today. At times our eyes meet and we get closer to each other. That's when he extends his hand to me and I happily give him mine. We walk together hand in hand, with the music from the taverns and shops we pass by covering the sounds of our hearts.

"Is Ellishawn a reality then?" Caroline asks me with undiminished enthusiasm.

"I didn't say that. It's just that you can feel the love in the air," I tell her as I throw a pebble into the river. The return from the trip seemed lightning fast to me. One moment we were in a magical village and the next we had returned in the capital again. As soon as we arrived at Lumina's Square and said goodbye, Caroline told Daniel that we would leave our luggage in the car and pick up mine as soon as we returned from a short walk. To stretch out, as she said. So all the way to the banks of the river I recounted to her everything that had happened with Shawn.

"Let me tell you my little one. Did you tell Shawn my favorite color and what would I love for a gift?"

"Yes, I did. But only after he asked me himself. He seems to be too shy to ask you. And I thought he was one of the brave ones," Caroline replies thoughtfully. We both sat side by side and gaze at the sunset. The moon in orange and yellow hue was reflected over the waters of the river for a few minutes until it finally hid behind the mountains.

"What are you going to do with the clue we found?" Caroline asks me as the first stars come out in the sky and tired we take the road back.

"I don't know yet. I'm trying to connect the places that Brillar has led me, the people I've met there and finally the inscription on the statue... *Life is full of mysteries that*

only the adventurous ones can explore," I say recalling the first sentence of the inscription." "What is certain is that I was not ready for an adventure of such magnitude," I answer.

"I believe the dreams you see are also related. They may be prophecies," Caroline says playfully.

"I don't think I look like Pythia and and I wouldn't want to fall into the void either. Unless you want to get rid of me, my little one," I answer ,nudging her.

"Of course not. Who will I have to keep me from doing more stupid things?" says Caroline laughing.

I accompanied Caroline to her house, took my suitcase from Daniel's car and slowly came home very tired. I quickly told my family the news and ran to my room. Fortunately, with so many excursions, I will lose a few pounds, I think with a laugh. I lie in my bed exhausted. I turn sideways, I turn again. I probably don't feel like sleeping because of the tension of the day. Then I remember Shawn's book. I get out of bed, open my bag and take out his gifts. I incorporate the lighting into the book and read the dedication on the first page:

To Elli. I hope you like it. With love a very good friend of yours.

I read the summary carefully. I flip through the book as I do with all new books and start reading. At first I'm not too excited to tell the truth. But then the story became a little interesting. It's a mystery, thankfully. No thriller, not much romance. *"David opened the door with reservation. The door creaked like a broken gramophone. He entered the dark room. With a loud thud the door closed behind him. He proceeded slowly. If Diana was there, he had to investigate it. After all, life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore."* I stop and look wide-eyed at the last sentence I had just read. I adjust the light better and read again. But yes it's the same phrase, it can't be a coincidence. I continue reading...

"Here I am," a voice is heard in the dark. David approached the place where the voice was heard.

"Diana are you okay?"

"Shh, they'll hear you, come slowly."

"Who will hear me?"

"The kidnappers, untie me quickly. We have to get out of here."

But they hadn't had time to take a step and a laugh was heard so sardonic that it made both of them shudder.

"Come on. What do we have here? Is the couple trying to run away? I don't think so. One day you will understand what you lost and you will struggle to win it back, my little David. Now that you realized it, though, it's too late.'"

This phrase... it was also written on the inscription. I continue the quick reading. "*Only in this way will you be able to free yourself, otherwise I will crush you...*

The battle will be uneven but you will continue to fight...

The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness..."

The phrases of the inscription were scattered throughout the chapter. I get out of bed to drink some water. From the agitation I forgotten that I still have the book at my feet and it falls furiously to the floor. As soon as the ground touches the ground, its pages turn and stop at a sketch towards the end of the book. A figure. Without a face. With his hooked claws pointing towards me.

This is the first time I stay awake all night. *Really* awake. I didn't close my eyes for a moment. I wait for the sun to appear on my window and, as soon as my windowsill turns golden from its rays, I jump out of bed. I get dressed in a hurry, pick up Shawn's book and run down the stairs. I hurriedly kiss the whole family, take a croissant from the cupboard and run out. I text Shawn that I want to talk with him and head to his house. I must find out how does he know these phrases and why did he include in his book the sketch of the impersonal figure. He immediately replied that he agrees to meet me. Pretty quickly I have to say... *Stay focused Elli, you have more important issues to deal with now.* I arrive outside his house and he is already waiting for me on the stairs. He sits on the landing and writes, very devotedly, something in a notebook.

"Good morning," I say with a smile.

"Good morning," he replies, descending the stairs. "Where do you want us to go?"

"I'd prefer the park."

"Perfect. So let's go." On the way we are both silent. I want to put my thoughts in order, so I don't open a conversation until we arrive. We sit on one of the benches overlooking the river. At first we just enjoy the silence and the Piranias (a cross between goldfish and piranhas) chasing each other in the water.

"Well? What did you want us to talk about?" Shawn asks me, breaking the silence.

"Let's start from the beginning..." I tell him what has happened in the last few days as well as the events that are taking place in my dreams. As soon as I finish, he turns his head thoughtfully. His gaze sifted through every inch of my face.

"And I guess that the figure you described is like that of my book?"

"Yes! I also found in your book scattered the phrases of the inscription that was under the statue."

"Unbelievable," says Shawn in amazement.

"Have you heard these phrases before? It seems impossible to me that you wrote them by chance. And the figure? Is it a random sketch?"

"Nothing is accidental. Wait, I'll explain to you... My grandfather loves stories. So, every night since I was little, I remember him coming to my bed and telling me about one. Thanks to him I developed my imagination and began to write my thoughts on paper. Until they became books. His most favorite story was as follows:

"Once upon a time there were four kingdoms. Lumina, Oscura, Rubina and Grisa. Each kingdom had a source of power, unique to each. One was intertwined with the other. If one were lost, it would affect all the others. The kingdoms had a single queen, Helada, who took care of the harmony and peace of the planet. Her leadership allowed it to have at her disposal all four superpowers of the tribes. So she could create crystals as strong as the rocks. She was invisible in the dark and could reappear whenever she wanted. She could even burn like lava but also heal or be healed whenever needed. Everything went smoothly and for many years there was concord between the kingdoms. Seasons passed and with them time changed. The first rains of Autumn, followed the snows of Winter and in turn the sunny days of Spring, passed the baton to the heat of Summer. The relationships, at the same time, between

the kingdoms were fraternal. Celebrations were often organized and all the tribes participated with great joy. Songs and laughter could be heard everywhere. The streets were full of life and everyone was happy with the way Helada governed.

Until one day something terrible happened... The stones of the kingdoms disappeared. The civil war was not long in coming. Everyone blamed everyone. The biggest blow, however, was the disappearance of winter. The chain of life was broken. The kingdoms were separated. Families were wiped out and from the wreckage of the disaster a shadow appeared. An impersonal figure. Helada fought with the shadow but did not have the strength to fight her fears. The dark figure knew full well that if he won the leader the kingdoms would be scattered, peace would die. The battle was fierce, the shadow won and Helada found herself beaten at the foot of a mountain. Next to her, the following words were found engraved on the stone:

"Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore. At some point you will understand what you have lost and you will struggle to win it back. Only in this way you will be able to free yourself, otherwise I will crush you. The battle will be uneven but you will continue to fight. The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness."

The shadow disappeared and there has been no trace of it since then. The commanders-in-chief of the kingdoms decided to end hostilities in memory of their queen. So a glorious era ended and between the tribes there is a tense relationship to this day... The end."

"What do you mean the end? That's it?" I say with disappointment.

"Yes, unfortunately, that's where the story ends," Shawn replies with a laugh.

"A similar story has been told to me by my own grandfather but not in so much detail."

"Probably because my own grandfather was the right hand of the then commander-in-chief of the Luminosos," Shawn says, lifting his shoulders.

"What? So it’s all true? Isn't it another variation of the history of the civil war?" I say with surprise.

"No, that's the real story."

“Wow. And you got inspired by your grandfather's story and put clues in your book."

"Exactly."

"But I still can't understand how that shadow appeared in the first place and why I keep seeing it in my dreams."

"I don't have an answer to that, unfortunately," he says smiling apologetically.

We turned our gaze back towards the river. The air is soft like a caress and begins to lull me to sleep. We stay there for a long time enjoying each other's company. At some point I decide to rest my head on his shoulder to make myself comfortable and he mechanically grabs me by the waist and brings me closer to him. This feeling of his body on me creates a feeling of security for me. We talked, while hugging, about what we haven’t discussed for so many years. For our hobbies, wants and beliefs, with our laughter shaking even the smooth surface of the water. That's how Shawn made me feel... Happy.

Chapter 5

I am on the edge of a hill and I look with joy at the landscape around me. This is my world, my planet, my Universo. With a blow of the wind I find myself in a cave. The stone walls are filled with frescoes depicting the Great Battle. But something else is visible in the depths of the cave but I cannot see it. I take a step and *pouf*, I'm in a tunnel. The darkness is deep but the holes in the ceiling let the light pass through like a spotlight that illuminates the path. I take two steps and a bolt of lightning splits the sky in two. Something white is shaking at the end of the tunnel. *Poof,* I'm in a flowery building. I have been lightly hurt and have scratches on my body. I look around anxiously. Everything is so bright. But a flash of suddenness blinds me. I half open my eyes and... *Ring*.

I wake up in my bed, turn off the alarm clock and stand still staring at the ceiling. What was that again? Another incomprehensible dream? Faintly and with cloudy eyes I see a glow suddenly appearing on the ceiling. I blink my eyes, rub them and it is there again.

"What do you want again, Brillar? Let me wake up and show up again in an hour," I say as I yawn. She is not intimidated and makes two swings up and down.

"Okay, wait for me to get dressed and we will leave," I text Caroline to meet me and I walk down the stairs sleepy. I eat something and leave a note on the fridge that I went out for my morning walk.

"Good morning. Do we have a new adventure?" says Caroline as we meet after a while.

"Good morning. Well, where do you find so much energy in the morning?" I tell her with half-closed eyes.

"This is who I am. Haven't you known me yet? A new day begins. Let's seize it."

"All I want to seize is my pillow," I answer boredly.

"What did that phrase say? Oh yes. *Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore.* Come on, move and let's explore them," says Caroline happily. I roll my eyes and we start our new adventure following Brillar together. This time, as I had imagined, she directs us towards Grisa.

"Do you have something new to say about Shawn?" she says slyly.

"What newer could we have. We just have a good time together," I say with feigned indifference.

"Well, now is my turn to find a boyfriend."

"I'm surprised that you mention it. I thought you weren't interested in these things," I say surprised.

"Changing scenes and situations is my specialty," she replies and laughs.

~

After an unbearable, long, morning walk we finally get on the train. This time the ticket collector doesn't pay attention to us as he cuts off our tickets and I breathe a sigh of relief as soon as I finally sit in my seat. Fortunately, the ride to Grisa is shorter as it is the closest town to Lumina. The landscape outside the window is changing, becoming wilder. The steep hills give way to vast and barren areas of land. The weather is dull, but the brilliant Kuervos (junction of crow and parrot) make their flights undisturbed outside our window. We finally arrive in the capital and all we see are happy people. Here everyone is healthy and this contributes to their psychology. Hot-air balloons are parked next to all houses for emergencies. Despite the civil war, many families have relatives from other tribes, and when health reasons occur the Grisa always run to help. This time Brillar leads us towards the city center.

Today the “Public Market” takes place and all the vendors have put their merchandise on stalls on the street and are shouting competing with each other to see who will sell the most. Fabrics of all colors, sweets, toys, exotic fruits, books, pillows of all shapes, even mirrors that create hallucinations. Everything you can imagine. Children play by throwing colored powder everywhere, while the vendors shout as they smear their stalls. The atmosphere is festive. Caroline dances with the children, also throwing dust everywhere. The pink one, of course! I follow Brillar more restrained and try to not lose sight of her.

We exit the Market and the glow leads us to a paved path to the left of the city. It is noon, although it is not visible in the cloudy sky. We cautiously go deeper down the path. It is narrow and around it there are small stone detached houses. As we pass by

them, low-key speeches are heard, which make me shudder. The gardens are full of flowers, and their newly watered soil brings coolness to my skin.

"Where do you think it takes us?" Caroline asks me in a whisper, as if the slightest sound could disturb the beauty of the place.

"I wish I knew," I answer, pursing my lips.

Suddenly from the yard of a house, a Wildcat, the guards of the houses, jumps in front of us. Having nowhere else to go we tried to backtrack. The Wildcat, as if it has mutated into Pero, attacks us. She jumps on me and scratches me. Caroline tries to push her away with a stick, which she finds by chance, to push her away as I shout for help. That's when a girl with curly short hair comes out of the house and shouts: "Ari ven aquí ahora." *(Mars come here now).* The Wildcat jumps down from me and the girl opens the gate of her house and puts the cat inside. With sympathy in her eyes, she approaches us and opens her mouth. But the words do not reach my ears as I feel like I am losing consciousness and falling on the hard stone road.

I open my eyes. I'm lying on a bed in a room that I'm seeing for the first time in my life. Everything is so bright. I hear whispers from the back of the room. I get up carefully and look around. The room is small with little furniture. A wooden wardrobe, a bedside table next to the bed and a large mirror. But in beauty it prevails. There are flowers everywhere, painted on the walls, as well as some roses on the bedside table in a vase. I rest my head exhausted on the pillow. The ceiling alone is white and makes me wonder if I am in an alternative hospital bacause this pain I feel could only lead me to a hospital.

"Oh you've finally woken up," Caroline says as she enters the room.

"What happened?" I ask her dazed.

"Nothing serious just Dora's cat filled you with scratches and you fainted from the shock."

"Who is Dora?" I ask confused.

"It's me. Sorry for the Mar’s attack. I had left the gate open and escaped. He is always hostile to strangers," says a tiny girl as she enters the room.

"It’s okay," I reply to her as I slowly get out of bed.

"Are you feeling better?" Dora asks me worriedly.

"Yes, I feel fine," I say as I look at the scratches on my hands. Surprisingly, I don’t feel the pain anymore.

"Perfect. We were saying a while ago with Dora about the traditions of her city. It seems that the Public Market is one of the trends of the region. Every week panic prevails here," Caroline says with joy.

"Yes, I got a taste at our morning walk. The only thing you didn't do was play hide-and-seek with the kids," I answer with a laugh.

"But we are all children inside. What the identity says is different," says Caroline, winking at me.

"If you feel better Elli, do you want me to show you around the area?" says Dora cautiously.

"Yes, of course," I reply with joy.

So we leave Dora's flowery house and her beautiful garden full of roses of all colors and head to the paved road. Small houses are popping up from every corner. They are all made of stone and are surrounded by beautiful gardens. In every garden we pass we see pets playing, either Wildcats or Peros, as guards of the houses.

"Our tribe consists of unique builders with special skills in landscape design. We mainly grow beans, peppers, tomatoes, peanuts and sweet cassava, but the main cultivation are maize (i.e. corn) and potatoes. Our main source of income is agriculture," says Dora as we walk out into the central square of the city.

"We have large areas of land where we grow our products. Although the surrounding area, as you will have seen on your trip, is barren, we are blessed as a city to have the right soil for the goods I mentioned above," adds Dora as we walk deeper into the city.

We walked for hours. Dora guided us through all the sights of the city, from the churches to the museums. The three of us made an incredible team. We saw the sunset together on a hill and promised to meet again soon. As we made our way back, we

agreed with Caroline that one thing was certain: Dora would become one of our best friends.

So, the Christmas' holidays are over, and along with them our strange explorations with Brillar. For a week now, no trace of the glow has been shown, which is both positive and worrying. The exams at the Universidad de Universo have begun and I am currently sitting at my desk with a stack of linguistics, translation and literature books in front of me. They're so many that if by chance someone passed by my window now they wouldn't even be able to see my head. So I'm pretty busy and there's no time left to waste on adventures. To tell the truth, the choice of my school was completely random and I don't even know what I will do once I finish. But I am a good student and I am not afraid if I won't pass an exam because of a small excursion.

Which leads me to think about the fact that Brillar has left me alone for the first time. Did she feel sorry for me and want to let me read? No, I rule it out... The truth is that the whole thing had a dose of madness. I had never made so many trips in a row. I got to know new cultures and people in such a short time. It is that our daily life follows a certain routine, but when we travel that routine ceases to exist. We are so far away from our daily habits that we are forced to become more flexible and eventually adapt more easily to unexpected situations. And I had a bunch of unexpected events. Certainly the cave in Oscura, the underground tunnel in Rubina, the oasis in Diamante and the paved road in Grisa have some connection between them. And Adrian, Sylvia and Dora also have to play a role because the moment I met each one of them the glow disappeared. These thoughts are spinning my mind and I can't read. Well not that if they didn't occupied my mind, I would find the right mood for reading, but that's another matter. *Concentrate Elli*. If I didn't have my inner voice to restore me in place I don't know what I would do after all. Well, I continue reading: *"Tourism is intertwined with meeting the needs of consumers. The knowledge of foreign languages reinforces this theory. The tourist feels more comfortable if you speak to him in his own language and enjoys the tourist experience better..."*

"Yikes," I jump from my seat.

---NEW MESSAGES---

"Hey Elli. What are you doing? Would you like to go for a walk with me?" My God. Message from Shawn. *Of course you will say no to him. You have countless things to read and you have not even started.*

"Hi. Fine. Yes, of course. When?" Well done Elli, congratulations. Inner voice, shut up please.

" Should i pass by your house at 8 o'clock? Is it okay?"

"Yes, fine. See you."

Second shock. WHAT AM I GOING TO WEAR?

"Caroline come quickly. It's a matter of styling."

"I'm coming right away," replies Caroline in a second.

Luckily, I managed to find the right clothes and Caroline did my makeup and made my hair. The result is, at this moment when I look myself in the mirror, to wear a light turquoise dress as long as necessary, boots with heels and my fantastic makeup: a faint blue eyeshadow and a light lipstick in a shade of red. My brown hair is straight (thanks to Karolina) and I have fixed it with a tiny headband.

"You're like a model," Caroline tells me, observing the result of her work.

"Aw thank you so much. I'm nervous," I tell her anxiously.

"You don't need to be. Show what you're worth and if he doesn't appreciate it he will be fool enough to lose you. There are bookworms elsewhere who do bookworming, darling," Caroline says with determination. Our laughter is interrupted by the sound of the bell.

"Ellie, Shawn has come and is waiting for you," my mother's voice is heard. We hugged in a hurry with Caroline and I gracefully descend the stairs. I feel like the Queen of Buckingham going down the stairs to her palace. As soon as I go down the last step slowly, so as not to fall, I look up towards the door. There stands Shawn, who apparently just had a chat with my mom, and now he looks at me with eyes wide open.

"What? Do I have something on me?" I ask with concern looking at my dress.

"You're gorgeous, my little girl" my mom replies and hugs me.

Shawn clears his throat and shakes his head in the affirmative way. He wears plain jeans, a button-down shirt and black jacket... It suits him. His brown hair is meticulously tucked back with gel, and his eyes sparkle as I smile at him shyly. We happily greet mom, who as soon as I walk out the door shouts for us not to be late.

Shawn extends his arm to me and we walk arm in arm until we are far from my home. Fortunately, dad isn't here. There would have been “carnage” as he is overprotective. Well and my mother is just the same. I know that if I turn my gaze now, mom and Caroline will definitely be looking at us from the doorstep, so I leave some time before starting the conversation.

"Well? Where are we going?" I ask him impatiently after a while.

"I won't tell you that yet. It's a surprise," he replies.

"Mmm nice, I like surprises." A few awkward moments passed before either of us said anything.

"Elli?"

"Shawn?"

We both say at the same time.

"You can speak first," says Shawn as we laugh.

"Well listen. It may seem silly to you but... I would like you to join us on the next excursion we will make with Brillar. As long as you have your grandfather's knowledge you can help us more to find a solution. If you want too, of course."

"Yes, of course. I'm glad you suggested it to me," he replies with joy.

"Perfect. It's your turn now," I say with hope etched in my eyes.

"Um, nothing important. Did you finish reading for the exams?" he replies to me, changing the subject.

"Okay, I haven't made much progress," I answer, looking away, not wanting the disappointment to show in my eyes.

"I know you will manage it. You're going to do great. Well, our first stop will be here."

"Really?" I say with some reservation. We are in front of a canteen. I wouldn't say it's the perfect place for the first date. If it's a date basically.

"Yes. Wait a minute," he tells me and heads to the seller. I choose not to sit on any of the dirty chairs and I wait for him standing upright. I'm starting to get a little nervous. Fortunately, it is not long before he returns holding two paper chocolate cups.

"There you go. Here they make the best chocolate in the city. Be careful not to get burned," he tells me and gives me a cup. Ugh ok we escaped the "dirty" food experience today. And did he bring me chocolate? He's incredible!

"Thank you so much. I needed it." I say with relief and drink carefully. "I can't live without chocolate. Whatever form it has," I tell him as I warm my hands on the paper cup.

"I agree. I can't imagine what people find in whipped cream," he replies and laughs. "Exactly!" I say, feeling that someone finally understands me. We continue our walk and I try not to look awkwardly around me or drink the chocolate at a fast pace or clean non-existent threads from my dress. I don't do any of this so I think everything will be fine. What did Shawn want to tell me beforehand and I interrupted him? Oh, I wish I could get into his head right now. I look at him and he turns his gaze to me. *What are you thinking?* No, you can't ask him that. He smiles at me crookedly and I smile back at him.

"Will you tell me now where are we going?" I say to him as I am starting to freeze. He immediately takes off his jacket and passes it around my shoulders hugging me.

"You didn't... You didn't need to," I answer with wide eyes. How did he figure it out? "It's stupid that I didn't do it sooner," he replies without taking his hands off my shoulders. His touch brings warmth to my whole body.

"Thank you," I answer and we continue to walk hugging. We passed several shops but Shawn didn't stop at any of them. We walked a little further until we reached our destination. "It's time to try Universo's best waffles. After you, ma'am," he says suddenly and stretches out his hand, opening the door of a café for me.

As soon as he enters, we find a free table in the background and head there. The cafeteria is almost full and it is a miracle that we find even one table empty. I usually

prefer to go with Caroline to other cafes more... quiet. However, the positive elements are the relaxing music, the warm lights and the festive atmosphere. So I am not particularly bothered by the noise of the people.

"Shawn?" I suddenly hear a voice. A female voice! I turn my head and see a tall, blonde girl with her red painted nails resting on his arm.

"Vivian," he replies seriously and gently moves her hand away.

"How glad I am to see you," she replies sweetly without being bothered by the gesture.

"I don't, on the other hand," he says and brings a smile to my face. *Vivian* purses her lips angrily and turns her gaze to me.

"Is she the replacement? I expected that after me you would have better taste." What? I take a step forward, ready to answer her about the brilliant blondes whose dye has altered their brains, but Shawn protectively puts his arm around my waist.

"Elli will never be your replacement, obviously, because she would never do what you did," he replies and turning his head gives me a kiss on the cheek. I blush all over and i smile sweetly at him.

"Let's get out of here," he whispers to me as his lips touch my neck. I nod and he grabs my hand, moves me away from the table and leads me to the exit of the cafeteria without looking behind him. We walk silently through the empty streets with the beating of my heart being the only sound in my ears. Shawn's thumb circles all over my hand preventing me from putting my thoughts in order. This *Vivian* must be his ex. For some reason they broke up and it's her fault. Was his kiss a way of defense? Was it real? Did he want to hurt her?

"Shawn?" I ask him softly. His shoulders rise mechanically as if a current had penetrated him, as if he had been lost in his thoughts and has only now returned.

"Yes?" he replies in a hoarse voice.

"You know, I don't like theater," I tell him as I want to be clear from the beginning. He stops and turns towards me.

"What do you mean?" he asks me, raising his eyebrows in confusion.

"If we went out on purpose to make her jealous, I want you to tell me," I tell him seriously. I don't like to be anyone's pawn, let alone the second choice.

"Is that what you thought all this was about?" he asks me, puffing. He runs his hand through his brown hair and makes it disheveled at once. He is so handsome even now that he is upset. "Listen. All this was accidental. I didn't even know she would be there. I'm real and I'm not pretending. She may have cheated on me but I would never have done the same," he says and his eyes fill with sadness. *Did she cheat on him?* Oh the...

"There's a difference between someone who wants you and someone who would do anything to keep you. Vivian made her choice and I made mine," he adds and touches my shoulders tenderly. I feel my heart melting and my legs buckling. Did he just admit that he chooses me?

"I'm sorry it ruined our night but I just found the best alternative," he tells me and turns my body 180° hugging my waist.

"What do you mean?" I ask him and look at him slyly.

"You'll see," he replies and smiles looking at the road. After two blocks he stops abruptly in front of a building. My favorite building! The building where I spend many hours of the day and when I return home gives me stern looks from my mother and advice on how to use time from my father.

"This is my favorite bookstore," we both say at the same time. So how perfect is that? We look at each other laughing and walk inside together. It's the coziest place I know. After my bed of course. It is in shades of gray and brown with sofas and beautiful pillows scattered in many places. It has two floors and is divided according to the type of books. In other words, each type has shaped a specific corner. Shawn heads to the corner of fantasy.

"I don't know what type of books you like. We can sit somewhere else if you want," he says thoughtfully.

"It goes without saying that we will sit here," I reply with joy and choose my favorite place on the couch. We sat down for hours and talked about our favorite books and movies. We took almost all the fantasy books from the shelves and exchanged our

favorite lines from them. People were passing by and looking at us because we were making a lot of noise out of our excitement. I didn't expect us to have so much in common with Shawn. I loved every moment I spent with him. Time, after all, is relative when you create memories in places you love with people you keep learning.

Chapter 6⚘

The next day is a tragedy. I have opened whatever book and note there is and I'm reading like a maniac. I have made up my mind that nothing will interrupt me this time. I have turned off my cell phone and I sit intently at my desk and read. That is what I said I did anyway at the beginning. Every ten minutes my mind made associations and led me to other issues. Like why Universo turns around, why is the sea blue, where is Brillar, why is Shawn so beautiful? *Ah Elli pull yourself together*. In general, the time passed like water and I did not understand when the evening came. At least I survived the day. I turned on my cell phone just before going to bed and saw Caroline's usual gossip messages. I answered to each one of them. And suddenly...

---NEW MESSAGES---

"Good night, Elli. ;)"

"Good night, Shawn. :)" I answer and a smile is painted on my lips.

I wish every night would end like this. Well, it's time for a review. I have to pass my exams first. Then I'll see what I'll do with Brillar, gather the clues I have so far and find the solution to the riddle. Finally, I'll clarify what I have to do with Shawn, because I really haven't understood yet. For now, however, I will snuggle up in my bed with my book in my arms until I fall asleep. Goodbye people...

~

Time has passed. The sunny, snowless, winter days are over. The exams are over, fortunately with me succeeding in them. And everything is beautiful. Time for walks and carefreeness. So one of these days, we took our walk with Caroline in the park which has begun to transform. The leaves of the trees in shades of brown and yellow have set up a dance around us as the light breeze sweeps them away. The atmosphere is unique! We decide to sit on a bench near the fountain and enjoy the scenery. The squirrels run from trunk to trunk holding nuts or mushrooms. The birds are tweeting. The nature is truly a living organism that with the right care and love can reward you with its beauty and grandeur. We exchanged our news with Caroline and talked about our future plans. As the time passed we decided to get up and take another walk. We

approached the fountain and observed the water as it changed colors under the rays of the Sol. Suddenly a blue flame emerged from the water.

"Brillar," I shout as if I was meeting again with an old friend of mine.

"Ah perfect. Did she appear again?" asks Caroline enthusiastically.

"Yes. She's here in front of us." Brillar makes a move as if in a greeting and then makes two swings. "I smell adventure," I say to Caroline in a conspiratorial tone.

"Then you have to send a message to Shawn before we start," Caroline replies.

"Yes, that's right." I sent him a quick message, and we waited for him to arrive. A while passed before we heard his voice behind us.

"Hello girls." We turn around and we see not only the beautiful silhouette of Shawn in front of us, but also of someone else's.

"What are *you* doing here?" says Caroline with anger.

"Is it possible for me to be away from the party, sister?" replies Daniel.

"Sorry girls. I didn't know you hadn't told him and it slipped my mouth," says Shawn, touching his neck awkwardly.

"It’s ok, don't worry," I tell him but I take a look at Caroline. The more people that know it, the more people will get involved in something that even I cannot solve. What if all this is my imagination?

"Well, let’s get started!" says Caroline impatiently.

"Yes, of we go," I say and nod to Brillar to start.

During the trip I inform Daniel about the information we have gained from our previous excursions and connect the places with the people I met.

"Well, how does that slow-witted Oscuros has anything to do with all that is happing? I don't think he's connected. Your meeting may have been completely accidental," Shawn says, with his face having a slightly reddish tone.

"I don't know if he has, but we can't rule him out," I say indifferently.

Apparently, the base of our trip today is Lumina, so I believe we will not have any unexpected meetings again. We head by bus north to the Boske forest. I have never crossed these paths before, as this place has always been forbidden to me. When I was little, my family and I used to have picnics at the foot of Dakota Mount. There was a beautiful bank, with natural bridges made of branches, foliage and specially shaped stones passing over the waters. My cousins and I loved playing hide and seek and hiding behind large rocks and trees. I remember every time we arranged this excursion I flew with joy. So, one day, as we were all siting together and eating with the beauty of all Lumina stretching out in front of us, I noticed the Boske forest more closely. In my eyes it was the largest forest in Universo. I then curiously asked my father why we don't have a picnic in that huge forest. Immediately my father's face changed. He got serious and said to me:

"My Elli, this forest is haunted. Since the time of the Great Battle, strange stories have been heard, that creatures beyond imagination inhabit it and that they are looking for their next prey. I don't want you to ever get in there. Okay?"

And I replied terrified: *"Yes, Daddy."* I am afraid now that if I say something like this to my friends they will take it as a joke, so I decide to hide my fear and continue following Brillar. My father may was just exaggerated because he was afraid of me going into the forest alone, just out of curiosity and getting lost. But as we get closer to the forest, my concern grows. Finally, Brillar stops in front of the entrance of the dense forest and her flame becomes more intense as if she foreshadows us for something. My gaze follows the height of the trees in the sky. One thing is certain. The only way out is in the clouds.

"Are we going to stand looking at the trees for a long time?" asks Caroline as she approaches me. Then, as if waking up from a dream, I lower my gaze and swallow hard. The whole gang looks at me with curiosity. *Come on Elli, you can do it.*

"I want you all focused. We don't know what we might encounter in there," I say decisively.

"Like what is likely to come across? A squirrel or at worst a angry deer," Daniel says with a laugh.

"Just be careful," I say seriously. I approach the forest and take a deep breath as if I was diving into the water. I take a step forward and enter the forest. All around I'm surrounded with trees and leaves. Nothing else. It's not that bad after all. I turn around and call the children. Then a gust of wind appears out of nowhere and lifts me into the air. My feet lose contact with the ground and I hover one meter above the ground. Just as I'm about to scream, Caroline appears behind the foliage. At the same time, the wind like a giant that has taken me in its arms gently leaves me down on the ground again. I find my breath and approach the children with trembling steps.

"Are you okay?" Shawn asks me, discerning the concern in my gaze.

"Yes," I reply to him, keeping my composure. What was that again? However, whatever it was I have no good feeling for this exploration. "Do you want to leave it for today? Shall we come another day?" I ask anxiously.

"What happened to you? Come on, don't be afraid, we'll see where the glow wants to lead us and we'll leave," says Caroline grabbing my shoulders.

After the whole group agreed, we continued our course deep into the forest. At every tiny sound I jumped up and turned my head right and left. All we see in front of us are trees and trees again. There's nothing special here, I kept telling myself. But I still had the feeling that if I turned my head around, I would see dark eyes looking at me and following me.

"Don't worry Elli. We're here too," Shawn tells me reassuringly. I nod in the affirmative way with an uncertain smile on my lips. If we all become meals to the monsters none of us will remain, I thought but I couldn't utter it. Maybe I was destined to suffer.

"Move on now. Quickly." A wild voice suddenly spoke. All of us stood as still as statues. The voice had come from right in front of us. We all did so as quietly as we could, approaching the place where the sounds grew louder. As we approached, carefully setting aside leaves and fallen tree trunks, we saw a clearing. The trees there were uprooted, and in their place stood a large palace made of black stone. Small houses made of wood and mud surrounded this ill-shaped palace. There was no beauty in this landscape; all I felt was intense fear and concern. Something bad was

going to happen. A man appeared to our right, but his features were not visible because he was wearing a hood.

"Sorry master. But it's too heavy," says a fairy. The poor girl is so tiny. She carries a black stone that is twice her size. Suddenly other fairies appear from the trees. As if something was pulling them.

"Here's your help," the figure says with a laugh.

The fairies painstakingly lift the stone and direct it to the grand palace. The figure suddenly stops laughing and stands still. Did he hear us? He slowly raises his hands and the cloak he wears falls towards his elbows. The skin of his hands has a black tint and his nails are hooked. As soon as I realize who is in front of me I unconsciously take a step back. *Hold on,* the dry leaves are heard under my feet. Oops no. At the same time the shadow turns its head towards us.

"We are screwed," says Daniel in a low-key voice.

"I guess we have some visitors my Bestias. But it is rude not to invite them for dinner. What do you think?" says the figure. As if in agreement from everywhere a loud sound is heard. Trees swoop aside, birds fly frightened away from their nests, fairies scream. In this pandemonium, terrifying monsters appear from everywhere. They are tall, they have ram's horns, their whole body is sculpted by cobwebs, and claws emerge from their chest. But the only thing that catches my attention is the bright yellow eyes of the figure who, as if sensing where I am, are locked with mine.

"ELLI RUN," shouts Shawn. My feet are stuck on the ground. I can't move. Out of fear? From the tension? I don't know. All I feel is sadness and despair inside me. The whole group has run away, shouting for help. At some point I feel someone shaking me and then grabbing me by the hand and pulling me violently. As if I am hypnotized, I follow him. The Bestias approach us with long strides. All I see in front of me are shadows moving, trees rustling. My mind is empty. But those eyes remain there. They are lurking. They follow me. Brillar suddenly appears in front of me and I return to the present.

"Guys follow me," I shout as the glow shows me the exit. Everyone panickily follows me. The Bestias are a breath away from us. Caroline's voice is heard as she screams in terror. A Vestias has grabbed her by the shoulders and lifted her off the ground.

"Carolineee," I shout as I launch crystals towards the monster with all my might. Daniel does the same, by making a cry of rage, and helps me save Caroline. Daniel also lets out a cry of rage and helps me save her. A crystal cuts through the tissues in the monster's hand, but Shawn is immediately underneath, catching Caroline in the air. We all run together towards the exit with the Bestias multiplying behind us, but just before I feel the claws of one of the monsters on my back, we come out of the forest. We continue to run towards the river with all our might. At some point I instinctively look behind me and relief overwhelms me. There is no trace of the monsters!

"Everyone just stop," I say out of breath. They all look back towards the forest and collapse on the ground due to fatigue. For a long time we stayed lying there, listening to the sound of the river flowing without the need to say the slightest.

"WHAT HAPPENED JUST NOW?" asks Caroline, terrified but also with a small dose of excitement. Probably from running. She always liked sports.

"These were definitely not deers," Daniel says, trying to lighten the mood.

"I had a premonition, but you didn't hear me," I say, looking exhausted at the river.

"What happened over there? I was yelling at you and it was as if you weren't listening to me," Shawn tells me with concern. I don't answer him right away. I want to clear up my thoughts a little bit.

"He's the figure. The figure from my dreams. The figure from your book," I turn around and say looking into his eyes. I understand the moment he realizes what I am saying because he jumps up and starts making circles around us. I guess this is his own way of emptying his mind.

"Yes. So are you telling us that this psycho is a figment of your imagination?" asks Daniel in wonder.

"It's not my imagination, since you saw him too."

"Even worse. A dream with flesh and bones. We are very lucky that we managed to survive. Are you feeling okay, little sister?" asks Daniel and touches Caroline's shoulder tenderly.

"Yes, Daniel just fine. Not even a scratch," she replies, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Well? What do we do now?" I ask.

"What do you mean what do we do? We return home and forget what happened. The adventure is all well and good, but enough is enough," says Daniel raising his hands in denial.

"I think that we should investigate it," Shawn says, breaking his silence.

"*I* think that you have lost your mind," Daniel replies.

"Elli, what do you think? It's your dream," says Shawn, ignoring Daniel.

"My opinion is that after we entered the dance we will dance," I answer, not believing what I just said.

Brillar wanted to show me the extent of the problem. She wanted to prepare me for the danger of the mission. Human lives are at stake. Today we were lucky, but if one day these monsters come out of the forest what can happen? We can somehow prevent this. But how? Am I brave enough to do whatever it takes?

"Here it is. That's what I didn't want to happen," says Daniel taking me out of my thoughts.

"Come on, brother. You also want to learn after all," says Caroline, making her sweetest face. No one can resist that; she throws away her bottom lip and makes her eyes wider like a doggie.

"Ugh, well. Agreed, my little one," he replies as he hugs her by the shoulder and we all laugh with him. So that's it. My nightmare came true. Next time, though, I'll be prepared for what's to come. I will defeat it and I will not be defeated. As the sun falls behind the mountains and the whole gang makes its way back exhausted, my thoughts fly again like a bird leaving its nest in search of food. I'll be back.

Chapter 7⚘

My next moves are mechanical. I pick up the blue thread and fix it on the painting above the photo. The red thread is already in place. The grey has travelled a route but the black one is the leader. The only thing left is the white one. A few facts, a lot of question marks. The painting is ready. It took me all night but I made it. Maybe this way I can put my thoughts in order. I take a few steps back and inspect my work. In the data table in front of me there are all the names, the cities, as well as photos of the people I met (glad for the presence of Internet). In the corner where the figure should be I put a large question mark as well as the riddle of the inscription. I sit on my bed. The next step I believe is obvious. I don't know if the others will like it but there is no other solution. I get up and send them a group message. I take a deep breath... So let's do it.

~

I arrive at the park first with a hot chocolate in hand. I believe that chocolate can lift your mood even if this isn't its intension. It just brings a smile to your face and you're ready to change for the better. I'm looking forward to meet with the others. I'm sure Shawn won't be happy at all with what I'm going to tell them but I can't help it, Brillar was clear. At last, after a long time, all of them appear half awake as it seems.

"Good morning, everyone," I say happily.

"Only for you apparently," says Daniel, covering his yawn. "Why did we have to meet so early?"

"Good morning, Elli," says Shawn.

"Let's hope it's worth it," Caroline says, embracing me. I explained the plan to them in as much detail as I could and they remained speechless.

"You aren't serious," says Caroline first.

"I'm serious," I answer and I feel the disappointment overwhelm me. I thought that at least Caroline would respond positively to my plan.

"I don't agree at all," Shawn says angrily.

"For that, I was sure," I reply with a sad smile.

"It's very dangerous though," adds Daniel thoughtfully.

"I know. That's why you don't have to follow me," I answer seriously.

"A lot can go wrong," adds Caroline.

"It's the only solution. In this way we will be able to solve the mystery. Or a part of it anyway," I say and shrug.

"I'm in," says Caroline with joy.

"Me too," Shawn agrees. The joy I feel is indescribable, it only remains... We all look at Daniel.

"What? Don't look at me that way. I won't let the monsters eat my friends."

We all laughed and set off on our first mission. Mission? As if we are secret agents. *Oh Elli, why are you going to get involved*, my inner voice warns me again. I want to know what happened to me in the woods. I want to know why Brillar chose us for this mission. The fate of Universo may be in our hands. Very grandiose statement, I know but I have the intuition we need to stop the figure and its monsters from coming out of the forest. Fortunately, I am not alone in this venture because I know for sure that I wouldn't make it.

The trip is more fun this time. There are few passengers on the train, so we make as many noises as we want. The boys have downloaded some jokes from the internet and Caroline and I laughed out loud.

-*Do you have books about curiosity?*

-*Yes, which one do you want?*

-*No, just wanted to ask.*

A snake and a librarian are discussing:

-*Sssssssh.*

-*Sssssssh.*

By the time we reached our destination we were all in tears of laughter. But when the voice announcing the arrival of our train at the station is heard, we discend silently and I guide them to where we had to go.

"Is this necessary now?" asks Shawn with indignation.

"Yes Shawn. We can't avoid it... Let's get in there," I reply.

"Pew. Where are we? It smells like a stable!" says Caroline with disgust.

"No, but inside there is the source of my upcoming headache." I answer as we look at the sign that appears in front of us.

"Danger, do not enter."

We enter the dark cave with the flashlight from our cell phones illuminating the earthen walls. Well how did I not think about this last time? Probably because I hadn't come prepared. Without preparation everything goes wrong. I follow the route I remembered from my previous visit to the site. This time there is no noise but only our footsteps on the wet soil. I wonder how a person can choose such a place for any use. The moisture penetrates my bones and makes me shiver. The smell of the closure is unbearable and the air is scarce. I try to take sharp breaths when I realize that I am on the verge of fainting. My flashlight illuminates the floor as we go through another turn. But its light suddenly falls on something else! I can see color on the wall and it is not the brown of the soil.

"Wait," I say stopping in the middle of the route.

"What happened?" Shawn asks me as he arrives next to me.

"Look!" I raise my hand and point the lens at the wall to my left. It is full of murals. I follow the flow of history from its beginning. It is a representation of the Great Battle. So yet another one of my dreams came true. The representation begins with a glow. Then the four kingdoms appear. Next comes Helada holding the four gemstones. People are happy but in the next scene they start running. Fires, destruction, Helada dead and above her stands a black-clad figure without a face. We all illuminate the

wall with our mobile phones and Caroline photographs the representation. We may find it useful. I leave the others behind me and decide to go deeper into the cave. I don't see anything important, only rocks and sand. Suddenly something moves in front of me, I approach but I don't have time to discern what it is...

"You're finally back." A voice is heard from my right. Someone hits me on the leg just so that I lose my balance and lifts me upright. My cell phone falls out of my hand and the moment I'm ready to shout, someone closes my mouth with his hand. I feel his warm breath on my cheek.

"But you also brought reinforcements and that I don’t like it at all. I only wanted you to be mine," he says mockingly. I get so angry that I bite him fiercely on the fingers and the moment he releases me I shout for help. Behind me a cry of pain is heard but also an angry exclamation. The person who held me before captures me again in his sturdy hands.

"I think the two of us didn’t make a good start. I'd like to change that." He tries again and violently grabs me by the waist giving me a kiss on the cheek and closing my mouth once again.

"ELLI? WHERE ARE YOU?" Caroline shouts just before appearing from the corner with the boys. The flashlight from their cell phones illuminates the face of the person holding me. Of course. Who else?

"Elli?" asks Caroline, taking a step forward and I moan in irritation.

"I wouldn't approach if I were you, little girl," says Adrian, who squeezes my waist and makes me grimace.

"Leave my girl now!" Shawn says angrily, already having crystals in his hands. His girl? That certainly needs discussion, but first we need to get rid of this thug.

"First you will explain to me what you want here and then maybe I will leave Elli ... my Elli," the last words are whispered in my ear so that no one can hear them. Shawn takes a step forward but Daniel holds him back.

"We came peacefully but the only person who can explain to you the reason is Elli. So you'd better let her talk," Daniel says hastily, realizing that he won't be able to hold back Shawn for much longer, as he struggles to get out of his grip. Adrian doesn’t

answer right away, but when he finally makes his decision, he nods and slowly lowers his hand, freeing my mouth.

"Stupid pig," I say the moment he frees me.

"You are exaggerating, my love. I'm sure my smell drives your mind crazy," replies the concrete idiot, not letting me hit him wherever am given the opportunity. You see my hands are still captively glued to my ribs, otherwise I would have hit him very badly now. Someone turns on a switch and two more people appear in front of us.

"Let me introduce you. Here is Tom and that's Dylan," says Adrian as two boys appear through the shadows. One is well known. He's the one who made the fuss at the party. The other is a new one. But I had no appetite for introductions.

"Well? Let me inform you first that if you attempt an attack in retaliation against ours, know that my friends here are not my only allies." As he completes his sentence shadows appear around us. We are surrounded! But I'm the only one who realizes it, as my group has focused only on Adrian and none of them are moved by the appearance of the rest of the Oscuros. But what’s going on anyway? I'm trying signal them that Adrian doesn't bluff but they don't understand my movements. I find my self-control and start.

"We came here today to make a deal," I say forcefully.

"I’m all ears," Adrian replies curiously.

"We will make a truce until we solve a mystery. The facts are the following..." I say as I recount all the events about Brillar and the forest. I do not describe the situation in much detail. It is good to keep a small basket.

"Yes, and you want my help so that..." he asks without completing his sentence waiting for my answer.

"To find the solution of the riddle," I answer.

"And what do I have to gain?" he asks with a sly smile.

"There you go. What was I telling you?" Shawn says, crossing his arms on his chest. Fortunately, he is calmer at the moment, although I can tell from his look that he wants to cut Adrian into pieces.

"You will win the favor of your tribe," I reply.

"I already have it," Adrian says almost before I even finish my sentence.

"Mmm, I don't think so," I tell him, smiling crookedly.

"I don't understand what you mean!" says Adrian, letting go of my hands and turning me towards him so that our faces are only a few millimeters apart. I feel Shawn squeaking his teeth behind me. I lift my gaze and stare internsely into Adrian's eyes. Now that he is under the light, it is easier for me to distinguish his features. His blonde hair is cut so as to enhance his angular face, his eyes have a bluish-green hue, although the light green color of the meadows predominates. Is it my idea or do I see brown spots in them? It's as if I'm being taken on a journey through a dark forest looking for an escape exit, and his bright smile is the sign that shows me the way. His mouth is well-shaped, and now a cunning dimple is formed on his right cheek. I hear someone clearing their throat behind me.

"I think you understand very well. Why did you ambush us at Christmas? Why is your lair inside a cave in the depths of Oscura? Why is your photo in every corner of the city?" I reply as I take his picture out of my pocket, avoiding looking him in the eye again. At the bottom in large letters it wrote.

Wanted

Adrian Barlow

Remuneration is offered

🌹

Adrian's joyful and complacent mood shatters. At once its features harden. He leaves me, takes the poster and tears it furiously.

"You don't know what they're accusing me of. Don't you dare ever threaten me again!" he says with his voice having a different tone. Full of pain and anger.

"I'm not threatening you. I understand that the attack you made at us was to look like a hero in a way. That a strong Oscuros won the weak Luminosos. To make amends for any crime you have done anyway. I also understand that you are hiding and that is

why you live in this cave. But if you help us with whatever knowledge you have on the subject, I have a feeling that you will help yourself along the process."

"I don’t want a psychoanalysis," he replies and looks at me with eyes that are burning.

"Okay," I say looking at him. "I understand that we were probably wrong that we came here today. Sorry, we will never bother you again." I turn my back at him and head towards the others.

"Wait— " ,Adrian says calmly. "I will help you. But under two conditions. First, you will not tell anyone where I am. Secondly, Dylan will also be involved in everything we do. I want to have a man of my own together. And in case something happens to me, he will narrate the miracles I did to the next generations," he says winking.

"Agreed," I answer him and breathe a sigh of relief.

"Good. But does this mean that I have to put up with the diamond kid?" he asks and turns his gaze to Shawn.

"Trust me, the feelings are mutual." Shawn says with disdain.

"Calm down both. Can we at least go out into the fresh air to talk? I feel like I'm going to faint in here," Caroline says.

We all silently agreed with her and we go out of the cave. It has begun to get dark and the sky is in purple and red shades. We all sit on rocks near the entrance of the cave and look at each other with curiosity. Now are we really going to work together Luminosos and Oscuros? It sounds like a bad anecdote. Be that as it may, Brillar, having led me here, knows better.

"Let's start with the basics. Winter has been lost since the four gems of our tribes were lost. Helada was found dead by a figure, according to people's testimonies. Next to her body was found this riddle," I say as I hand Adrian a piece of paper with the riddle written on it." The Boske forest is inhabited by this figure and its monsters. It's real! We saw it just yesterday. I believe that if we solve the riddle, everything will fall into place," I say with a shudder at the outcome of the story.

"Let me understand. By solving the riddle, will we be able to neutralize this figure and its vicious monsters?" Adrian asks.

"That's right," I reply with a shudder.

"And all this is based on some dreams and a glow that no one sees beyond you?" says Adrian in wonder.

"Exactly," I answer and I suddenly feel ridiculous.

"That's crazy," Adrian says, and I wonder if I've really lost my mind. But then, to my surprise, he starts laughing. "And I'm born for crazy things."

"Do we still want him on this mission?" asks Shawn.

The time passed and by nightfall we arranged our next steps. Who would have thought that there could be a civilized debate between eternal rivals? Luminosos and Oscuros. Sworn enemies, they become allies... for the good of all.

Chapter 8⚘

All six of us are in an underground tunnel, with the light entering through the holes in the ceiling to illuminate our passage. The truth is that I struggled to convince Adrian to come out of his lair in daylight. He prefers to go out at night so as not to be noticed. But my parents would not agree under any circumstances for me to go out at night and with two Oscuros as a company. Not that they are aware of it, of course!

"What's the reason for this trip after all? Is it to become a rat meal?" Daniel asks.

"Brother if you didn't want to come with us then you should have said so," replies Caroline with less vitality than she usually has. I have noticed since yesterday that her attitude has changed somewhat. She walks more shyly and avoids looking at the others comfortably, and Caroline is anything but shy. So I stay a little behind and without the others noticing, I pull Caroline towards me.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" I ask her in a whisper.

"What's going on?" she replies.

"Are you ok? You've been acting a little strange since yesterday," I say and look at her seriously.

"I'll tell you later." I nod and we continued our journey. Our trip to Rubina was, unfortunately, a necessary evil. I didn't have the best experience in this tunnel last time but we all have to make sacrifices so we will be doubly rewarded, as my grandmother says. The group, on the other hand, has not been fully united. There are still tensions. As time will go by, however, everything will be solved. I'm hopeful at least.

"Dylan, did you arrange the supplies for the lair?" asks Adrian.

"Yes they're already stacked on the shelves," Dylan replies.

This kid is very strange. It seems that he is constantly in a nirvana and when someone speaks to him it is as if he is returning to the present again. I've noticed that he doesn't talk much. He has barely articulated five words from the beginning of our acquaintance. Adrian has probably taken the wind out of him, who continues to be just as annoying. He doesn't miss an opportunity to tease me by creating a wave of

rage to Shawn. Not that I don't want to break his head but I hold on for the good of the team.

"Are we going to continue our walk in this wonderful place for a long time?" says Daniel again.

"Be patient. We are almost there," I reply indignantly. Even I, although I don't want to admit it, have my reservations about my dreams. It may all have been coincidences and I would not want under any circumstances, if everything turns out to be a big bubble, to be the cause of more tensions between the tribes when it breaks.

"What’s that?" shouts Shawn from the far end of the tunnel. Or maybe it wasn't a coincidence, I think as I speed up my step. A cape as white as snow thrown on the dirty floor. Despite its location, it remains shiny and contrasts with the wretched appearance of the tunnel. As if hypnotized, I lift it in my hands and wear it. The hood falls on my face and with a flash illuminates the darkness. A whisper sounds like a buzz from bees.

"My queen, my queen..." I pull down the hood and look around.

"Did you see and hear that too?" I say dizzy.

"What do you mean?" Caroline asks me full of wonder.

"I did see something... A beauty in white. You should wear white more often, it suits you," Adrian says.

"Oh, let me knock him out," Shawn says, pulling the stalactites out of his hands.

"You won't catch me, diamond kid. I'll defeat you before you can see me approaching," Adrian replies rolling up his sleeves.

"Do you want me to try it and see if it's true?" replies Shawn, taking a threatening step forward.

"Enough boys!" I say as I put myself in the middle so as to separate them. "This is neither the place nor the right time to settle your differences."

At the same time, they turn their backs to each other and cross their hands like children who were scolded by their mother. Well, I must searched a lot so as to find them. Collectible pieces. So unique and mature! Anyway, back to our topic.

"Well now that we've calmed down. I ask again. Didn't anyone see a flash or hear whispers?" I say with wonder.

"I only heard my belly purring," Daniel says, raising his hand.

"Oh boy. Daniel your answer is out of topic," says Caroline indignantly. "My Elli, no we didn't understand any change," she replies calmly.

"Very well," I answer thoughtfully. "I think we saw what we had to see. Do you want to go back to the surface?" I say, putting the cape in my bag.

"With pleasure," says Daniel.

We all climbed the same stairs that I had climbed the previous time, but this time, however, is broad daylight and we can at least enjoy the beauty of the wild forest. As soon as the last person went up, we decided to take a walk and if the plan didn't work out, we would return to Lumina again. We walked for a long time and talked about everything. But always keeping an imaginary distance between the two tribes. We didn't become friends overnight. Suddenly a deer jumped happily behind a tree and came to me.

"Hey Elli. I'm glad to see you again," I hear a familiar voice telling me. I turn around and face the wild beauty of nature in harmony with Sylvia's untamed crimson hair.

"Hey Sylvia," I say happily as I extend my hand and caress Pekenia. It wasn't so hard to find her after all.

"Ahh, I want to caress her too," says Caroline jumping up and running towards me. As I turn to look at her, I don't miss a faint smile on Dylan's lips. My gaze follows his. It can't be! He is looking definitely at the deer... otherwise we will surely have a bad ending.

"Why did you come this time?" asks Sylvia, as she comes next to us.

"We came for a walk. Nothing important," I answer her guiltily. I'll tell her the truth when the right time comes, I thought. It was no coincidence that I met her that night. Brillar's plan certainly includes Sylvia.

"I’m glad to hear it. The forest can always become your next friend. As long as you know how to treat him," she says and caresses Pekenia.

"That's right," I answer thoughtfully. "Let me introduce you. Here is my best friend Caroline, her brother Daniel, Shawn, Dylan and Adrian." Everyone greets her with joy except Adrian who of course wants to make an impression.

"Why did you mention me last, love?" Adrian asks, taking Sylvia's hand in his. "Unimaginably fascinated," he says and kisses her hand. I roll my eyes. Can’t he be serious just for one time?

"Okay, since we're done with the introductions, do you want to continue our walk? Sylvia we would be very happy if you would come with us," says Daniel.

"Gladly. I can also give you a short tour of this beautiful place that has kept me company since the day I was born," says Sylvia.

So we continue our walk carefree and in a good mood as Sylvia told us everything she knows about this forest. I, on the other hand, took the white cape out of my bag at some point and tried it again. At once I felt like the Snow White who, although she is not my favorite princess, does not cease to have her own unique story.

"What I told you before was true," Adrian says as he appears out of nowhere next to me.

"Which one?" I answer, pulling the hood off my head.

"That the white clothes suit you," he says and smiles broadly.

"Thank you," I answer him with wonder. I can't decipher his behavior. One moment he is distant and the next he compliments me.

"You know I'd like to get to know each other again. In the *proper* way this time."

"Okay. Hey, my name is Elli," I tell him and extend my hand to him. He smiles and tends his own. But instead of shaking hands, he pulls me with force on him. I fall into his arms and he approaches my neck, just before touching me he replies:

"I am very glad to meet you Elli. I'm Adrian." His scent is a combination of freshly cut lawn and salty sea. But how does he manage to smell this way? I look around, fortunately the group has moved on and soon disappears behind the trees.

"Listen to me closely. If you want us to get along you will stop this habit of becoming the Casanova and start behaving civilized," I tell him as soon as I find my composure. *What happened to you Elli?* Why are you still entangled in his hands? I push him away from me and head towards the children.

"What do you find in him?" says Adrian in a low voice behind me. "I have the whole package."

"But you don't have something basic," I reply to him, turning to look at him. "Humility."

I run to catch up with the kids. I don't want to be around Adrian anymore. He leads me to paths I have never explored before. My bad self comes to the surface every time I see him. While I should have ignored him, something leads me to fight with him. Whenever I see him, I get angry. I'd better stay away from him, then.

"... 9.4% of Universo's surface," says Sylvia as soon as I get close to them.

"Where have you been?" Caroline asks me as soon as she realizes I'm next to her.

"I'll tell you later," I reply, imitating the tone she had when she gave me the same answer a few hours ago.

Adrian finally came after a while with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed. I don't know if my words affected him but he didn't say a word the rest of the way. Better! I didn't feel like fighting.

"Each forest species has its own requirements in terms of moisture, nutrients and climatic factors. There is a mutual interaction and interdependence between plants, animals and the natural environment. But if external factors such as human act, then the balance is disturbed," says Sylvia.

"Has this particular forest been altered by people's activities?" asks Dylan. I didn't know that an Oscuros might have sensitivities, I think as we continue our walk towards a small bank.

"Fortunately, the Arbol forest is protected by the law," replies Sylvia.

As we approached the bank, a beautiful treehouse appeared with shimmering lights inside and a small staircase on the side. Sylvia went up to this dreamy house and

returned with some snacks. We all sat by the shore and enjoyed the peaceful scenery. At some point I took the opportunity and approached Sylvia. Better late than never.

"May I have a word with you?" I ask her shyly.

"Of course," she replies. I sit next to her and think about how to get started. That our meeting was not at all accidental? That one of the reasons we came to the forest was to meet her? That I would like her help in saving Universo?

"I don't know where to start," I tell her, laughing sharply.

"How about starting from the beginning of the story?" she replies with kindness.

"So that's fine..." I recounted all the events to her in order. Her facial expression did not change for a moment. She showed neither surprise nor derision in my words. As soon as I finished she said:

"You don't even have to ask. I'm in," she says with a smile.

"Really? Are you sure? This might be very dangerous."

"Do you think the forest doesn't hide dangers? From the small mosquito to the big bear. Besides, I want more than anything to help restore the balance of our ecosystem. If that's the way, I just have to follow you."

"It's because we don't know each other so well. How can you trust me?" I say to her in wonder. She smiles at me and puts her hand on my leg.

"I have an infallible intuition, my Elli. I got it with animals but I think I've developed it in humans as well," she says, and we both laugh. She lives in nature but nature also lives by her. That's how all things are in life. Chained and balanced.

"So are you in love with an Oscuro?" I ask Caroline, as we sit on my bed in our pajamas and discuss today's events. Caroline came for a sleep-over tonight at my house and by the way we will leave together tomorrow for our new mission.

"I don't know, I guess. No... yes?" replies Caroline. She takes the pillow from my bed and hides her face.

"I had some clues but I wanted to check it first. But that's not good Caroline and you know it. After all this that we are doing he will remain one of our enemies, if things go wrong. Unless we solve the mystery. So it's all yours," I answer her.

"What? Don't you like him?" she asks me, looking at me in amazement.

"Dylan? Is he compared to Shawn? Please now," I say and we laugh together.

"I don't know. It's that he doesn't talk much. I can't psychologize him."

"I know he is fully in love with you already," I answer and we burst out laughing.

"Really? Are you joking?" she says and hides her face on the pillow again.

"I'm seriously saying it but we said the romance should wait," I add, raising the index finger of my hand in warning.

"Come ooon… Well you didn't tell me why you disappeared at some point in the woods?"

"I was talking with Adrian."

"What do you mean?" asks Caroline slyly.

"Look, we got into a fight in a way. He asked me what Shawn had that he hadn’t and I told him his humility."

"Yes... Was there anything else? Are you hiding something from me?" says Caroline winking at me.

"What else should had happen?" I ask her in wonder.

"I don’t know. Did he express any feeling on his part and you rejected him? Because I saw him as a plucked chicken when you came back from your fight."

"He is the personification of egoism. How can he express any other emotion?" I say, laughing sharply.

"Why are you being mean to him all the time? After all, he compliments you every time."

"I don't know why but every time I see him he flies me off the handle."

"Sure," Caroline says again seriously.

"What?" I ask her and throw a pillow at her.

"Nothing," she replies and she throws me one too. And so a big pillow-war began. At some point we got tired and with a bunch of hair all over our faces we finally laid down to sleep.

"Caroline are you asleep?" I ask her, opening one of my eyes.

"Yes," she replies and yawns.

"Thank you for being by my side."

"Thank you too, my lovely sister," she replies before yawning and we both fall into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Chapter 9⚘

"Elli come near me. Closer. Don't be afraid," says a sweet and melodic voice. I approach near where her silhouette is presented. She wears a white cape. Like the one I found in Rubina. I'm getting even closer. I can’t see her face. The moment I arrive next to her a second figure appears in front of me, with his back turned towards me. He wears a black cape. He probably hasn't noticed my presence because he is heading towards the sweet voice without paying the slightest attention to me. Suddenly he grabs her by the neck furiously and lifts her high into the sky.

"Elli have courage," says the white-clad figure without a trace of fear before falling violently into the void. The figure in the black cape begins to laugh. His laughter makes me shudder, but I don't make a single move. I'm afraid he'll realize that I was a witness to his heinous act. But he slowly turns his gaze as if sensing me and looks at me. In the black darkness the only things that stand out are two large, yellow eyes.

~

I open my eyes. Caroline happily sleeps next to me. I don't want to worry her again with my nightmares. I slowly get out of my bed and get dressed. I want to take a short morning walk before we set off for our last destination. I get out of the house and make a few circles around the block of my house. This dream was very different from the rest. This time I was not the victim but I was just an observer. But the victim called me by my name. The victim was... Helada? A figure killed her and her favorite cape was white, as my father has told me. But how did she know my name? And what does the cape I found have to do with all this? Why did I see her death? I'm probably overanalyzing my dreams. I guess everything I have in my subconscious has decided to come out like a tangle on the surface. I look at my watch. Great! Time has passed, I think as I speed up my step and get home. Caroline is already ready and is waiting for me at the front door with a croissant and juice in hand.

"Good morning my Elli. I understood that you haven't eaten anything. Here take these and of we go because we are late again."

"Good morning. Ah perfect. What would I do without you?" I answer and eagerly open the package of the croissant.

"Less fun stuff I think," says Caroline as we make our way to the square, where the boys are waiting for us. Daniel had brought Adrian and Dylan by car, after much murmuring, so that we could all set off on our journey together.

"Didn't I tell you not to step on the seats?" We hear Daniel shouting as we approach.

"Didn't I tell you that I don't follow orders from a Luminoso?" Adrian replies, crossing his arms.

"Good morning, guys," says Caroline happily.

"Girls, we won't get along with him at all. He stepped on my girl," Daniel says as he picks up a cloth and starts cleaning his car seats.

"Good morning, Elli," Shawn says and comes up to me intertwining his fingers with mine.

"Good morning," I answer him and smile. Is Shawn looking at me a little more intensely or is it my idea?

"Yes. So, let's get started?" says Adrian angrily.

We all got into the car and Daniel after a lot of angry glances towards Adrian, finally started. All the way he was talking about how important this car is in his life and something else about respect. Fortunately, his lecture on the subject did not last long because the moment we entered the capital we all admired the landscape in ecstasy. The Public Market is all by chance today again and many residents of Grisa keep their baskets and get everything they need, from fertilizer to sugar. But we did not come here for leisure today, our destination is different. Fortunately, Sylvia had already arrived and was waiting for us at the end of the road. She didn't want us to take her by car when I suggested it to her because she prefers to travel by public transport. Thus, she added, pollutants and exhaust gases that are harmful to the environment are reduced. Daniel parked his car at a good spot away from the Market and we all headed together on foot to the paved road. But as soon as we got closer we saw something terrible. Fires were coming out of every roof and people were running in panic in the street. But the only one that stood out was Dora who, tiny as she was, was running with buckets of water towards her house.

"What are we waiting for? Let's help them," I say decisively and as if in agreement we all ran to the nearest well. Smoke, yelling and panic suddenly become one in the terror of loss and suffering.

Angry flames spring up from everywhere. The smoke makes the atmosphere suffocating. We, with clothes on our faces, pour water fighting with the beasts, having in our possession few supplies to defend ourselves. From the quick conversations that took place, it was said that the fire broke out under strange circumstances. The flames came from the sky, as many pointed out, along with a black cloud, which like a shadow appeared above their heads and began to shoot fire, like the flames of a dragon’s mouth.

"Dora? Do you and your grandmother have somewhere to stay?" I ask her coughing as we have sat down to rest. After a long time, fortunately, our project was completed, but in the condition in which the houses ended up it was a half victory. The girl's house has burned down for the most part. Dora had gone out for her morning walk a few minutes before the "attack". So when she heard voices and saw the smoke she was one of the first to participate in the battle with the flames. Her grandmother, on the other hand, was in the Market and was thus saved from certain death. Again, however, the effort of all of us was not enough.

"Not unfortunately," Dora replies, looking sadly at her home.

"Well, listen to what we're going to do. I will host you for as long as it takes in my house because we have a room for a hostel and your grandmother can stay with my uncles," I tell her.

"It is not possible. It doesn't—."

"I don't want any objections," I interrupt her before she finishes her sentence.

"Okay... Thank you. Thank you all very much for your help. It was valuable," she says with tears in her eyes.

"You are welcome sweety," Adrian replies.

"I wish we could save your house too, but since you and your grandmother are safe, that's what counts more," Daniel says reassuringly.

The next few hours passed like the hurricane sweeping it all. We made sure everyone was in good health and there was no person trapped in a house. We then helped Dora to collect from the rubble her few belongings that had remained untouched by the flames, although most had been reduced to ashes. The two paradoxes, however, were that the rest of the houses had less damage. As if the focus of the "attack" was Dora's house. Also, the fires were limited only to this particular paved area. Like the goldfish in the fishbowl, which is affected only by the events that occur in its place of residence, while its external factors are indifferent to it. Very strange.

Eventually we headed to Daniel's car where we separated. Adrian and Dylan would take the train back to Oscura, as would Sylvia to return to Rubina. On the way we didn't say much as the atmosphere was charged and we didn't want to embarrass our guests. The only thing I didn’t agree with, however, was the presence of Ari, Dora’s wildcat, due to our previous "acquaintance", but it would be very rude to mention it. We first passed by my uncles, who gladly accepted Dora's grandmother, and then we headed home. My parents had their reservations at first because of Ari, also because of my father's allergy, but we agreed that he would only stay in Dora's room. So I showed her her room, I assured her that I would be glad to help her with whatever she needed and let her settle down. Certainly the fire was not accidental, like our walk in Grisa but it is better to let the day pass, to wash away the bitterness it brought. Tomorrow will be a new day, a new flow will begin and I am sure that it will sweep away many revelations in its path.

I wake up abruptly due to a constant noise coming from the lower floor of the house. Pots and speeches are mixed with the quick steps of Dora and my mother, as far as I understand. The two of them will probably get along very well together. I get up and go downstairs to see what the fuss is about. As soon as I arrive at the kitchen I am left with my mouth open. The table is filled with food. But not just the usual ones. There

are some new ones in addition to milk, juice, coffee, bread, nutella, butter, honey and cupcakes, as well as ham and cheese.

"Ah did you sleep well my flower? Good morning," my mother says as soon as she understands my presence.

"Yes. Good morning. What is all this?"

"They are traditional dishes made by Dora. Your friend is a brilliant cook," my mother replies, tenderly touching Dora's shoulder.

"Exaggerations from Mrs. Melina. Good morning Elli. Sit down and tell me what do you think," Dora says with a smile. I sit and wait for the rest of the family members to come down so that Dora can explain each dish to us.

"Well, this is a Tortilla, a traditional pie with chorizo sausage, peppers, onions and diced potatoes. These are Churros, like donuts, with sugar and melted chocolate. This is a Leche frita made with milk, egg yolks and flour. Finally, this is Jamon is a special flavor of ham and comes from white pigs."

"Thank you very much but you didn't have to bother," I answer her, looking longingly at all the dishes.

"That's what I've been telling her since morning," my mom adds.

"I love to cook and I want to somehow repay you and the hospitality you provide me. Start eating then, now that they're hot," Dora replies cheerfully.

I tried all the new dishes that Dora prepared for us and they were really all delicious. So I got to know her culture a little better and made an imaginary trip to her city. We collected the plates and everyone dispersed to carry out their morning chores. I suggested to Dora that we take a walk to Lumina so that I could show her around and she gladly accepted. I also called Caroline, who passed by the house and we all left together.

"Well Dora, did the room suit you? Is there something missing that you need me to bring you? And your grandmother is well? Does she feel comfortable with my uncles?" I ask her as we take our walk.

"Everything is perfect, my Elli. If it weren't for you and the kids, I don't know what we would do," Dora replies gratefully.

"Don't you have any other relatives?" asks Caroline.

"Not unfortunately, I lost my parents in the Great Battle," says Dora sadly.

"I'm so sorry," I say and touch her shoulder tenderly.

"That’s ok. I hadn't met them. I was a baby when they died and my grandmother raised me," she says, but her eyes remain sad.

"Did you finally understand how the fire broke out?" I ask her changing the topic of conversation. I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable or sad because of the events of her past.

"I saw, like everyone else, a black cloud which began to spew fires."

"Didn't you see anything else? Beyond the strange cloud?" asks Caroline, who understood where I wanted our conversation to go.

"Mmm. I saw something but... I'm not sure. It may sound crazy," Dora says after a while.

"Trust me, we have heard and seen a lot of crazy things in the last few days," I reply encouragingly.

"I think that... I think I saw a shadow watching me before the first flames fell from the sky." Caroline and I look at each other at the same time.

"I'm paranoid right? I know it might have been an illusion," Dora says as she realizes the look we exchanged with Caroline.

"Quite the opposite. We also believe that a figure may indeed be entangled in the attack that took place yesterday," I reply.

"What do you mean?" she asks confused.

I explained for one last time all the facts concerning the mysterious figure and at the end of my narration Dora looked at me in shock.

"And what does all this have to do with me? Why did he attack my house? *How* did he attack my house? Does he possess so much power? Can he get out of the forest? Is he definitely trapped there?" asks Dora non-stop.

"We don't know. But he definitely wanted to achieve something with the attack and he focused on your house," replies Caroline. Dora clenches her fists in anger.

"He could have killed my grandmother. We have to do something. *I* have to do something. He may attempt to attack us again."

"The only solution is the following..." I reply to her and carefully present our plan to her. "It goes without saying that the decision is yours. It's a big risk and I don't want you to get hurt because of me," I say at the end of the narration.

Dora looks at me thoughtfully. She didn't respond immediately. We made a round of the park and continued our walk to the river. Caroline nudged me at some point with the wonder painted on her face. Indeed, Dora's silence was somewhat worrying. Just before we reached the front door of our house, Dora broke her silence.

"Wait," she says and stops.

"Did something happen?" I ask her.

"The only reason I took so long to answer was because I'm afraid to leave my grandmother alone if something happens to me. As well as my Ari of course. In no case am I afraid. I want more than anything to take revenge on the culprit."

"Understandable," says Caroline seriously.

"It goes without saying that we understand and we will not be mad at you if you do not want to be included in the plan," I reply.

"But... the risks are for the brave. If you guarantee me that you will take care of my grandmother and kitty if something happens to me I will gladly come with you."

"Of course, Dora. You didn't even have to ask," I answer her. I don't think my uncles have any problem taking care of a granny and her cat. In any case, Dora will return safe and sound after the mission. Let’s *all* hope that we come back safe and sound after this adventure.

Chapter 10⚘

Hot lava, diamond daggers, darkness and voices. But how did we get to this point?

My heart beats like crazy. Everyone around me is trying to defend themselves. Chaos is in front of me. The end of the world. A destroyed forest. An incredible battle. An enemy in the flesh. Shadows are mixed with cries. Gold dust becomes a hot lasso that creates scratches. Everything foreshadows the end, but we're still at the beginning. The search for winter has begun and the world will soon know the terrible truth and understand what is written of their destiny to live.

~

All nine of us are at the entrance of the great mysterious forest. Four girls, four boys and Daroulis. Ready for whatever comes up. That's what we believe in the beginning, anyway. I take the first step and I feel something pulling me like a magnet towards the forest. I go further, aware of the fact that the others are waiting for me to enter first so that they can follow next. So, I enter. I take two more steps and I feel a force coming out of me and moving like a wave in all directions. It was as if a dam broke and all the trapped water poured out with so much momentum that it moves everything in its path. Again the wind greets me, lifts me on its shoulders and spins me. The rest of the company enters this magical world, then the wind calms down, the wave of power subsides.

"Guys?" says Caroline. We all turn around and face her. Her hand rests on an invisible wall at the entrance to the forest. She begins to bang her hands furiously in the air, but all her efforts are in vain. The entrance has disappeared! So, we will have to find another way out.

"Yes. So, we are trapped in this beautiful and not at all terrifying forest," says Daniel.

“Oh, Dios mío. What are we going to do now?" asks Dora as she gets off Daroulis in a panic.

"The only thing we can do is continue with our plan and worry about this parameter later," I answer and everyone agrees.

So, we go deeper into the forest. During our journey, Dora is on the back of Daroulis (who will be her guardian in case of an attack, along with the bat that her grandmother has given her), Shawn and Adrian make way and the rest of us check for suspicious movements to our right and left. I wish in my heart that Brillar will appear, otherwise I don't think we will be able to do much. I stay behind and let the kids move on.

"Brillar, you can show up. I have fulfilled your wish. We're all here.", I say in a low voice. I wait. Nothing happens. Come ooon. Show up. My hope is being lost. Without the guidance of the glow we will not complete the plan properly. But suddenly a flame finally appears in front of me.

"Hey Brillar. Long time no see," I say relieved. She makes a swing in the air and becomes intense.

"Yes, I know something bad is going to happen. That's why I want your help with something." The glow turns into a question mark.

"How about we confess some fairies?" Brillar stands and after a few minutes happily makes two swings. Nice, the easy part of the plan has come to an end. All I can think about is how easily the difficult part can turn into a nightmare. We will wait and find out.

The roles are reversed. Brillar and I are now in front of everyone, showing the path we should follow. There were many protests on the part of the boys but they finally understood that selfishness doesn’t has a place here when so many lives are at stake.

"Are we sure we're going in the right direction?" asks Daniel in a low voice.

"Brillar knows the way," I say. Or rather I *think* she knows.

"Oh man. These bugs are so disturbing," says Caroline as she waves her hands furiously in the air.

"The forest is a natural ecosystem. Its main feature is the harmonious coexistence of so many forms of life. Harmonious living is a law that works nonstop in the forest," says Sylvia as if reciting a poem.

"Does this girl always talk that much?" Adrian says to Dylan.

"I also have sharp teeth to bite hard," Sylvia replies angrily.

"Oh very nice. That's how you'll fit in with the environment," Adrian continues.

"Have you lost your mind? What happened to you suddenly? ¿Estás loco?" asks Dora, raising her hands.

"Yes, I guess I'm crazy to come to such a place with a bunch of fools. And the best part is that I am trapped in here with you all," says Adrian angrily.

"Calm down Adrian," Dylan says.

"Hear what your buddy tells you. After all, we put up with you for so many days," Shawn says.

"You, diamond kid, don't need to talk much. A diamond may accidentally stick into your tongue," Adrian says. What's going on back there anyway, I think, and as I turn around I see Adrian with Shawn ready to get in a fight. I run to them.

"Can you stop? All this leads nowhere." The boys act as if they didn't hear me and continue to fight each other.

"Stop, I say." Adrian has acquired several scratches on his legs while Shawn has a blackened eye. But don't they understand anything? We must not fight with each other but unite against a common enemy. What's even worse is that Daniel starts shouting encouragingly to Shawn while Dylan has inadvertently entered the game encouraging his friend. The girls too are looking at the battle in amazement. My blood starts to boil. I've been keeping it inside me for so long, and it's time to break out. The glass overflows when the boys begin to bleed from the face.

"I SAID STOP."

I suddenly feel inside me a force that, like a bubble, bursts uncontrollably and unfolds all over the space around me. I close my eyes and do an introspection. The truth is that I feel invulnerable. Like a superhero I feel like I'm flying in the clouds. A great weight has been lifted from me and like a soft feather the wind carries me to unknown paths. I open my eyes and float in the air. But how beautiful everything looks from above! Wait half a minute. Do I float in the *air*? From *above*? A scream escapes my lips which makes me lose my balance for a moment, but does not make me fall to the ground. What's going on? I look down and see the whole group, now tiny, looking back at me with wonder, with fear? In the ground around the group, alloys of lava and crystals have been created. I look at my hands. One moment I see

them, the next I don't. I had a scratch on my arm from tree branches as we walked with the children deep into the forest. Now it is gone! Slowly, controlling my unprecedented strength, I descend to the ground and in an instant, as if a button has been pressed, I am myself again.

"Elli? What happened just now?" Caroline asks first as I approach her.

"I don't know," I answer, looking at them all one by one. I don't want their attitude towards me to change. No matter what happened to me, I am still Elli Lopez.

"I'm sorry but that was INCREDIBLE," Adrian says, waving his fist in the air with enthusiasm. That's a reaction I wasn't expecting.

"Elli? Did you know there was so much power in you?" Shawn says agitated, keeping his distance from me. Why is he doing this? I'm not a monster. I'm just something else that I haven't identified yet.

"No, I didn't even know its existence," I answer him sincerely. Brillar was by my side all this time I was in the air. She had changed color and from blue she had four shades: red, white, black and gray. Each one alternating with the other. But now she has acquired her normal color and is moving furiously in front of my face.

"Brillar, calm down. What happened to you?" In one move she leaves from my side and heads towards the forest at breakneck speed.

"Hey, wait. Where are you going?" I ask her as I run after her. We don't travel a long distance as after a curtain of foliage; I see something unique in front of me. I hear the group's panting behind me but I can't take my eyes off the landscape.

"I don't... was... prepared... for so much running," Daniel says as he reaches me.

"Wow. This place is the personification of the greatness of nature," says Sylvia next to me. But we don't take many steps as a wall of shiny gold dust and white fairies cut our way to the tiny fairy city.

"Who are you and what do you want in our city?" A squeaky voice is heard from the middle of the wall. I immediately raise my hands in a sign of peaceful disposition.

"Calm down, we are not your enemies. We just got lost and are trying to find the exit of the forest. I know we are asking for a lot but we would be indebted to you if you offered us food and accommodation even for tonight and from tomorrow we will relieve you of our presence," I say beggingly.

The nymphs do not immediately lower their defenses but rally in a circle and begin to chat squeakily with each other. "They were lost ... known... forces... attention... " the words are heard scattered. The nymphs decide with a common nod and re-create a wall.

"We decided to accept you into our city, but if we notice any impropriety on your part we will turn you into dust," says the same nymph who spoke before, apparently their leader.

"Completely understandable. Thank you so much," I say relieved. "My name is Elli and here are my friends from left to right, Caroline, Daniel, Shawn, Sylvia, Dora, Adrian and Dylan."

"We are happy to get to know each other. My name is Nymphadora and they are my sisters. Come and will show you around our city," says the team leader.

With great joy, therefore, we followed the fairies into their magical world. "We are the first inhabitants of Universo. We are born from the pollen of plants and live until the plant from which we came withers. We usually live 20 years. Our city, Nympha, existed since ancient times, free and self-reliant. Until..." Nymphadora stops her narration in doubt as to whether she would continue the sentence she began." Yes, what I was saying? Ah, the first inhabitants of Nympha built these magnificent buildings only with the power of the gold dust they possessed. It took many years to create the whole city. Our strength comes from the bottom of the river, that's why you see we live so close to it."

As we listened to Nymphadora's narration we crossed the beautiful houses of the nymphs, which were small like mushrooms, and proceeded to the large bank of the river where a beautiful diamond palace was located. As soon as I saw it, I stood still, capturing its beauty in my mind. It was built inside a huge tree trunk and its roofs were pointed and triangular made of shiny diamonds. The stairs leading to its front

door were straight out of a fairy tale. Huge stones, flanked by blooming and green coniferous trees.

"... And so we arrived at the palace of Queen Helada. This is where our queen lived before her tragic death. She preferred as she said, to live in the most enchanting spot of Universo. To be inspired by it. To create in it. To govern with its beauty as a starting point and an end point. She loved this place," says Nymphadora and I feel the sadness and anger in her words. I may have been little but I remember the whole world praising her kindness, beauty and dynamism. She was a worthy queen, but after her death and without heirs, the right to govern Universo was lost. She was the link that connected the chain. The kingdoms were scattered. The people were divided. Winter disappeared. And HE is to blame for everything.

"Elli?" Nymphadora asks me.

"Yes, what?" I say as I unclench my fists and try to calm down.

"Are you okay? Did I say something that bothered you?"

"No, I'm fine. Let's continue. So where are we going to stay?" I ask her, changing the subject.

"Here," says Nymphadora and points to the palace.

"Cool!" says Adrian.

"Really?" asks Caroline and squeals.

"Are you sure? Isn't there another place? Are we desecrating her memory in this way? I know that only someone with royal blood can stay in the palace," I say with reservation.

"Not at all. Our queen often had visitors tired of long journeys and hosted them in the guestrooms of her palace. So shall we go?" Nymphadora replies reassuringly and without waiting for an answer she flew towards the palace. We slowly climbed the stairs.

"Oh my… all these stairs," Daniel says with a gasp.

"Shh, brother, it’s also an opportunity to do the exercise you’ve always avoided," says Caroline and we all burst into laughter.

We finally arrived at the huge wooden door of the palace. Nymphadora made a sharp move right and then to the left. Then she raised her hands and gold dust appeared out of nowhere in front of us. It passed over each of us individually, stood for a few seconds, and then continued to the next one. As if it scanned us for some reason.

"Be patient. The gold dust checks for any dangerous equipment on you and then scans your faces so that you can access the palace," says Nymphadora. As soon as the gold dust finished its work, it turned and at breakneck speed passed through the door of the palace.

"It's a spell we made to protect our queen. Now you are free to enter," Nymphadora continues. I take a step forward and the door magically opens on its own. I feel the awe of the whole group accumulating within me. I hadn't imagined even in my wildest dreams that I would have the opportunity to see, let alone stay in the palace of Helada. We all slowly got inside.

In front of us stretches a huge golden carpet that leads to a marble staircase. In the sky there are huge chandeliers, illuminated and frescoes of angels. Statues of great Universo's personalities frame the staircase and columns with an Ionic-style fill the space around us. We climb the huge staircase of the palace. Along the entire length and width of the wall to our right lies a huge library. It literally touches the ceiling. I will definitely spend all my time in this part of paradise. As soon as we get to the headband I realize the greatness of this palace. In front of us is a huge living room with armchairs and an elaborately made fireplace in golden shades. At the same time, a huge mirror creates the illusion of the existence of this magical world in duplicate. To our right is a huge corridor that is divided into rooms and to our left in the trunk of the tree is a small shrine, which contains all the images of our Saints in miniatures. I approached, lit a candle and prayed. My Saints, help us save Universo. Having their help as well as my friends' my morale was lifted.

"This was our queen's suite. And here you'll stay. The creature you brought with you will stay in a specially designed area, like a hut, next to the palace," says Nymphadora after a while as we walked towards the rooms we saw a huge space separated by golden doors. Each door contained the name of each of us. But how did that happen? But of course what I'm asking. Magic! The only thing is that... My name is missing.

"Ehm. Sorry, but where I'm going to stay?" I ask Nymphadora with wonder.

"Ah yes, that's right. You see, there aren't many rooms. So you Elli will stay in the Queen's room," replies Nymphadora as if it were the most natural thing in Universo.

"I don't think you're serious?" I ask her surprised.

"It goes without saying that I speak seriously. So, settle in and for whatever you need we are at your disposal. Have a good night," says Nymphadora and like a tornado flew out the window and disappeared.

"Sweet dreams, my queen," Adrian says with a bow and opens the door of his room.

"Know that I will visit you in the morning. I don't miss this opportunity," says Caroline and hugs me.

"Good night everyone," says Daniel.

"Buenas noches!" Dora replies.

"Good night, my lady," Shawn says and kisses my hand, making me blush. In turn, Sylvia and Dylan say goodnight to me until I am alone in the hallway. I turn my body and grab the doorknob of the Queen's suite and slowly open it. Elli today you will sleep like a queen, I say to myself, and I run to the fluffy golden bed.

Chapter 11⚘

I turn to the side, roll over on the bed, look at the sky of the room full of small twinkling golden stars. I make up my mind that I won't close my eyes tonight. So, I get up and head towards the window. I sit on its soft, velvet-covered windowsill. I bend my legs and bring them close to my chin. How beautiful our world is! The moon illuminates the dreamy forest like a spotlight and the waters of the river rush down from their source. Small rocks surround the mushroom houses and fairies fly over the water lilies of the river, patrolling the Boske forest and the palace of Helada. Not even in my wildest dreams would I have imagined myself sitting on the same windowsill that our queen once did. Unbelievable! I look at the suite again. It's huge, almost like half of my house. It has a strong element of gold and silver touches. Comfortable armchairs are on my right, a majestic desk with a huge mirror just opposite where I sit and the bed of course on my left. I turn my gaze to the mirror. From my point of view I look like a miniature in the incomparable beauty of nature that lies behind me. But something spoils the landscape, a shadow reflects in the mirror. Slowly I turn my gaze towards the window and look down towards the river bank. I see someone walking slowly and finally sitting on one of the rocks. It seems I'm not the only one who can't sleep tonight. In an instant I make the decision, put on my coat and leave the room. I go down the long marble stairs of the hall and exit through a side door to my left. As I walk, I tighten the jacket over myself. It's very chilly tonight. *Elli, what are you doing? Go to sleep*. Shh inner voice. I want to know why I'm not the only one awake tonight. I approach and the shadow shakes as it perceives my presence.

"What are you doing outside at such a time?" says the shadow.

I sit next to him on another rock and look at him.

"I would ask you the same thing," I answer and adjust the jacket better on my shoulders.

"I'm not used to so much opulence and luxury," Adrian replies as he approaches his face towards the moonlight. He slowly turns his head and smiles at me, bringing to the surface the deep dimple on his right cheek.

"But why are you here?" he asks in wonder. I can see a sign of sadness in his voice. Something concerns him. Am I willing to find out though?

"Well, *I*..." I say and I look at the frogs that pop out of the water. "I'm used to sleeping on a harder mattress."

Adrian laughs sharply and turns his gaze towards the bank. We stay like this for a while. Speechless. At some point I feel the cold penetrating my body. *Time to get in, Elli.* As I get up from the rock and am ready to say goodnight to him, he gently grabs my hand. I feel a wave of energy passing through me, channeled by Adrian and I receive it with enthusiasm. *No, Elli, be reasonable.* I grab his hand and push it away.

"Stay a little longer," he tells me in response to my gesture. I shake my head in the affirmative way and sit next to him again. My defenses are gone. Great. I will also freeze to death. He, as if listening to my thoughts, takes off his jacket and passes it over my shoulders.

"Thank you. But don't you want it? The cold is insufferable," I tell him gratefully. As if this gesture reminds me of something.

"No, I'm fine," he replies with sad eyes. I have never seen his arrogant face in such a state.

"What is certain is that you are not fine," I reply to him and resist the temptation to move the fringe from his face to see him better. As irritating as he is sometimes, I don't want to see him that way. "Do you want to tell me what bothers you?"

"I don't want to discuss it... Let alone with a Luminoso!" he replies with anger.

"Awesome, here comes the arrogance, again. It is my fault, after all, that I'm trying to talk to you in a civilized way," I say and jump up.

"Okay. Sorry. Can you sit with me a for a while? Please..." says Adrian apologetically. I sit next to him for the last time. Another insult and I leave him here to freez. He raises his head and looks at the sky.

"Have you ever thought that the stars in the sky are people we have met or not in our lives? They stay there and look at us. They follow us every step of the way. They don't interfere, they only watch us. And they will always be there whatever we do. Right or wrong."

"I understand what you mean. When I look at the starry sky, it may sound very melodramatic, but I think, I feel like the only one is looking at it too," I say, raising my head.

"The only one?" Adrian said with a laugh. "You girls with your romantic minds." The blood rises in my head. What the little boy said just now?

"I'm sorry sir. Men wouldn't exist without women. We carry you in our womb for nine months. Provided, of course, that you also find a woman that you will respect and love and the chain continues. Without love, life does not go on. It's one thing to say *I fell in love* and another to say *I love*. Men change women like shirts and you think that's called love? The only one, if I someday be lucky enough to meet him, will be my Yin and I'll be his Yang. He'll be my salt and I his pepper. He'll be my sea and I'll be his sky. Do you understand?" Adrian stares at me now, his mouth slightly open.

"I didn't expect such an answer but that's why I like you. Because you say what you think bluntly." I think I misheard. Did he say that he likes me? Didn't I just downgrade the men?

"Do you want to tell me something else?" asks Adrian after a while.

"Like what do I have to say to you?" I ask him angrily.

"I don't know maybe about your unique power? About how much in love are you with me? That you finally found the only one? Whatever." Yes! Good old Adrian is back.

"The first time I realized its existence was in the morning. I felt from a young age that something was inside me but I hadn't given so much weight to learning. I am also NOT in love with you."

"Well," he says, imitating my style.

"It's my turn to ask. Why are you wanted in Oscura?"

"I don't want to discuss that either. So we better enjoy the scenery," says Adrian, shrugging his shoulders with indifference. I don't continue the conversation. Better that way. I don't want to know his secrets. In any case, we are enemies in a temporary truce. I start yawning and my eyes get heavy.

"I guess I should go up to my room," I say and stand up.

"Do you want me to accompany you?" he asks and touches my hand again as I return his jacket to him.

"No I know the way. Good night Adrian," I say hurriedly and walk away.

"Good night Elli. I hope you dream of me tonight as well as the previous nights," he says, finding his humor again.

"An Oscuro with a bad sense of humor? Nightmare," I reply to him and taking his real laughter in response, I leave happy.

I sleepily climb the countless steps of the palace. Why are they building SO many stairs? I arrive at the room tired and immediately head towards the window. The shutters are shaking like crazy from the evening breeze. Before I close them, however, I see its shadow again. This time standing. Furiously throwing rocks on the bank. And finally approaching the rock where I was sitting, picking up the jacket he put on me and... *smell it*.

The next day I wake up to a knock on my door. Who’s in the morning? I barely get up of my bed. I reach the door and as soon as I open it I see Caroline. I take a look at her and go back to my bed. She closes the door and sits in the comfortable armchairs opposite me.

"Happy to see you. Good morning to you, too, my Elli."

"Mmm good morning," I reply to her and put the pillow on my head. Why doesn't she let me sleep another 5 hours?

"I can see that you stayed up late last night," she says slyly.

"You know that when I change my environment I can't sleep well," I answer through the pillow.

"Is this the reason or a handsome Oscuros?" Hearing this question I slowly lift my head and half-open my eyes, I ask with feigned wonder:

"What do you mean? I don't understand you," I answer and fall back on my pillow.

"I think you understand... I saw you yesterday. You should know that the windows of all of us have view of the bank of the river. So I guess everyone else saw you too." I open my eyes and get quickly up. I'm not sleepy anymore.

"We didn't say something important to fulfill your curiosity."

"My love, what you did didn't bother me. I'm not sure about Shawn though. Let's hope he didn't see you because the whole thing with the jacket and the laughter was a bit romantic."

"There is nothing romantic among us," I answer firmly.

"You don't say… So which do you think is our next step?"

"I will try to approach Nymphadora to get information about the figure and then we will see."

"Great, let's get started then," Caroline says enthusiastically.

~

After the morning conversation I had with Caroline, the whole group went upstairs where the huge dining room of the palace is located. The space is filled by a table in the center of the room with candlesticks, which are lit and golden flames spring up like ping pong balls from their tops. The dishes on it are countless and the delicacies plenty. We sit down and start devouring everything in our path, discussing, however, about irrelevant issues because we don't know for sure if someone is listen to us. And walls have ears as we know it.

"I think we should name our team somehow," says Caroline.

"Yes, that's right. Should I tell you my idea? Let's call it: The beauty-likes, the smart-ones and the monsters," Daniel says with mockery.

"Who did you call a monster, short-fat guy?" Adrian asks angrily.

"I didn't mention your name, you idiot," replies Daniel.

"I would like our name to have an ecological character," Sylvia says.

"How about Amigos?" Dora asks.

"Now are we really doing this?" replies Shawn, hiding his eyes with his hand in indignation.

"The strange-one also popped up," Adrian says with a laugh.

"Who spoke to you in the first place?" replies Shawn. Adrian bangs his fist on the table and is ready to stand up.

"Calm down all of you, please," I say rolling my eyes. There will be carnage if I leave these two alone. Shawn turns his gaze and looks at me with disappointment. He has never looked at me like that before. Did he see us last night after all?

"How about we call it GLORY? They will be the initials of our tribes Grisáceos, Luminosos, Oscuros, Rubicundos Youths," says Caroline suddenly.

"I like it.", I reply with enthusiasm. Everyone in turn shake their heads positively.

"Perfect! From now on we are the Glory Squad," Caroline replies with enthusiasm.

"Okay, because we didn't come here for vacation, should we talk about something essential now? My cell phone doesn't pick up a signal and I'm sure none other than you, we're trapped in a magical world with no way out, our relatives don't even know where we are and we want to face an enemy whose name we don't even know," says Daniel with indignation.

"Okay brother. Relax a little. We won't have a chance to stay in the queen's palace again, and we're trying to make the time pass joyfully so as to not go crazy in here," says Caroline.

"Guys, I think it’s better not to talk about our mission in here," I say whispering. I have a feeling that someone is watching us. I look around but I don't notice anything alarming. But I feel there is something there.

"Elli are you okay?" asks Caroline.

"Yes I’m fi..." my eye catches a movement from my right. Something getting lost towards a hallway. I stand up and run towards the corridor.

"Where are you going?" asks Adrian.

"Don't follow me. I will be back soon."

The hallway is to the right of the dining room. At first it is a simple corridor with doors on both sides. As I move forward, slower this time and with caution, the corridor narrows. Is this normal? White walls with golden doors give way to gold walls with white doors. A blinding light forces me to close my eyes. I raise my hand trying to see, to at least discern what is in front of me. Brillar is the one who facilitates me with her shadow. It's not a surprise that she appeared right on time. I felt her presence before I even saw her.

"What is it Brillar? Why did you bring me here?" The glow without answering becomes so intense that everything turns white around me. The blinding light forces me to close my eyes. A tornado sweeps everything in its path. Suddenly, silence. I'm standing alone in front of a colorful door. Painted with the four colors of the tribes of Universo. I stretch out my hand and grab the knob. It is now or never I say and open the door.

I open the door and enter a forest. The door behind me closes by itself and disappears. Just perfect! Let's see how I'll get out of here. Nature is rampant around me. But... this place reminds me of something. I walk through the trees and bushes. Through the river. Fountains with colorful waters, trees in gray shades, fairies and elves, nymphs, forest animals, flowers of all kinds. But it can't be! I turn my head and see it. The same statue, the same inscription. So the door is a gateway to Lumina.

"Elli what are you doing here?" I hear a squeaky voice behind me. I turn around and see Nymphadora hovering in front of me with her arms on her waist and anger painted on her face.

"Ah Nymphadora I was looking for you. To... ask you... where is the palace's kitchen. I wanted to... cook something to thank you for your hospitality."

"Yes, but how did you come here?" she asks insistently.

"Through the door?" I respond with feigned innocence and show the place where a few moments ago there was a colorful door.

"How is this possible? It is not possible. Only the queen could enter the Enchanted Forest through that particular door," says Nymphadora and does circles around me, talking to herself. "That means only one thing...".

"I don't know if what I'm going to say will help but I've come to this place with Caroline before. From that entrance," I say and show the creeper plant in four shades whose leaves come together and form a U in the center.

"Yes. This complicates things even more. You see, this place is sacred to us nymphs. It is the place where our queen was born and lost her life. We have vowed to protect it with our lives and not let anyone find out its location. That's why we've cast a very powerful spell that allows only people in close relationship with the queen to cross it either from the "curtain" or through the palace's secret crypt. The invaders just see a forest, the guests see a paradise."

"And how did Caroline and I find out this place?"

"I wonder too. The entrance, however, is always the same as the exit. You entered from Lumina and exited from Lumina. Now you've entered from the Boske forest and you're going to get out from the Boske forest."

"Yes. Are you indirectly kicking me out?" I ask her and I lose hope. But since this gate won't help us get out of the forest, why did Brillar bring me here?

"Indirectly but clearly yes."

"If I can't get out of the 'curtain' nor through the door since it has disappeared, how am I going to leave?"

"Wish for it Elli and you will see." And within seconds Nymphadora disappears from my sight. *Well done Elli, you messed up. You didn't extract any information, but you'll stay trapped in here too.* So let's see. Can I change the data?

"I wish to return to the palace of Queen Helada." Nothing happened. I repeat louder. Again nothing. I look around me. Noone and nothing. Elli, you have to find the exit yourself. I close my eyes. I concentrate. I think about my destination and take two deep breaths.

"I want to go to my friends." Suddenly a whirlwind appears in front of me and sucks me in it. With a blast of wind I find myself again sitting in the large dining room of the palace.

"What's in—" says Adrian.

"I'm back," I say happily.

"Do you have any explanation for what happened just now, or are you going to say the same things you said about your unreal power?" says Daniel somewhat angrily. And so I recounted to the Glory (sounds nice) the events that happened a moment ago.

"So you and I have a relationship with the Queen?" asks Caroline somewhat confused.

"I don't know. However, there is no exit to the Enchanted Forest either."

"Beautiful. So we're back to zero," Dylan says. We sit silently at the table and look at each other.

"I think that a walk might do us good. What do you say?" says Sylvia.

"Agreed—" BOOM. A deafening sound shakes the palace. We all fall under the table as Nymphadora appears and flies past us.

"Don't say a thing," she says panting and she throws infinite gold dust over the table just before a shadow appears on the window. Two large yellow eyes penetrate through the crystal clear windows of the dining room sending a wave of shivers down my body. Eyes similar to the foaming waves of the sea that foreshadow bad news to the unfortunate sailors who will find themselves in their path.

Chapter 12⚘

"Nymphadora. Get out. You've got work to do," says the figure and his voice sounds like he is one step away from us. Nymphadora cautiously emerges from a hatch under the huge windows and appears in front of the figure. We cannot hear their discussion, but we understand from the face of the nymph that the words of the figure are an order. The boys make a move so as to see better. I shake my hands menacingly. Are they nuts? The figure, as if perceiving the movement, turns his gaze back towards us.

"Nymphadora do you have guests and you haven't told me?" asks the figure and his voice sounds like a loudspeaker again in the dining room.

"No, Master Miedo," says Nymphadora terrified. His gaze wanders. He looks at us but it's like we don't exist. Nymphadora says something to Miedo and he turns around, looks at her and quickly flies away from the huge windows. The nymph, just before flying with him, turns and brings her index finger in front of her lips. The message has been received. We remain invisible. Literally and figuratively.

“Wow. We screwed it up," Daniel says in a whisper after a while.

"Now what do we do?" replies Sylvia.

"We have to wait," I say skeptical. What job can nymphs have with this tyrant? And why do they do what he tells them? Isn't the forest theirs?

"So from now on the enemy got a name," Shawn says.

"Yes, Miedo. Means fear," Dora says and shakes in disgust.

"I think we found a good reason to get information from Nymphadora," Caroline says.

"I think the same thing," I reply.

~

After a long time Nymphadora appeared from the lower floor and signal to us to get up. As we stand on our feet, we all stretch our limbs and at the same time, as we had agreed, we look at Nymphadora full of anger.

"Now are we allowed to talk? " says Caroline angrily. The truth is that in irony my best friend is the leader. I have not yet realized how sometimes in such sweetness there can be such a biting mood.

"Ehm yes of course" says the nymph ashamed. Well done, Caroline.

"Can you tell us now how in such a safe place someone invades without being punished?" I say critically.

"You are right. I should have warned you," says the nymph sadly.

"Do you want to tell us what happened? Who was he, or rather what was it?" Daniel asks.

"Ok I'll explain to you all," says the nymph after a little thought. "Come with me."

We followed the nymph to the staircase that leads to the third floor of the palace. There was a single, white space with armchairs, a huge plant whose branches reached every corner of the room, a swing attached to it and finally a huge library in the center gave the finishing touch to this enchanting composition. Circularly on the walls were hung the paintings of all the ancestors of Queen Helada. The whole royal genealogical tree before our eyes. The group poured into the space and each of us looked at a painting. Other faces known; others unknown. The history of Universo on four walls.

"Please sit down," Nymphadora says. We sat comfortably in the armchairs and the nymph headed to the middle of the room where she sat in the dreamy swing.

"I'll start at the end of the story," she says looking at us. "Miedo is our enemy. We have by no means allied with him. From the moment our queen was lost we have been his prisoners. By killing her, he became our master. We cannot disobey his commands no matter how much we want to. You see, we are made to serve the leader of the Bosque forest. With the end of the dynasty of kings, Miedo gained this privilege. The various generations of kings who passed through this very palace were more our friends than our masters. But he... he feeds on our fear. He enjoys torturing us. Fortunately he is forbidden to enter the palace as our queen has cast the most powerful spell. The Lágrima Mágica. With her tear she sealed the palace gate and only those who truly deserve it can cross it. Here at least he can't bother us."

"That is, the gold dust that checked us for any dangerous equipment and then scanned our faces, as you said, was actually the queen's spell?" I ask her with curiosity.

"That's right," replies Nymphadora.

"So we recap: Miedo is the tyrant of the region and you have to do him all the favors, but you can't get rid of him. Isn't there a magic spell or anything to repel him?" asks Shawn as if he had heard my thoughts.

"Not unfortunately. We've tried everything. You see, as we are the first inhabitants of Universo, nature gave us a blessing and a curse. To be able to do almost everything with our gold dust, but to always have a master to bring us back to reality. The power can get very insidious sometimes."

"Yes, but the kings could also rein you in, for their own selfish purposes," says Dylan.

"They could. But they didn't. The bond we created with each inhabitant of this palace was so close that there has never been a sense of superiority on either side. We lived in harmony," says Nymphadora, reminiscing. "Now that I have clarified the position of the nymphs in relation to the figure, it's time to take you back a few years. At the beginning of nothing and the end of everything," says Nymphadora and with a shake of her hand everything turns golden.

👑

"*Feel, listen, act*," my mother used to tell me from a young age. I did not expect this phrase to follow me through all the steps of my life. I stand here in front of my people and I feel great joy and gratitude that they love me and I love them the same. The priest holds in his hands the most precious object of Universo. The crown of the four gems. Everyone is looking at me. I feel their impatience. I hear their applause. *Act*, then. I bow and wait for the priest's speech to end. He raises his hands and I lower my head. The crown is unusually heavy since it has the four stones of the Universo in its cases. Fortunately, this will not be the crown I will wear every day, otherwise I would not be able to stand it. I smile, greet with gratitude and say a few words about the future of Universo. I wish I had my family by my side at this time.

"Long live the queen. Long live," they all shout with one voice. I bow to the crowd. I look around me. The Enchanted Forest is dressed in today's festive clothes. My place,

my home. This is where I walked for the first time, this is where I played with my siblings, this is where I consulted my parents. And this is where my coronation takes place today. Who would have expected it! An eighteen-year-old girl to become a queen. But I'll be worthy of it as my ancestors were. I am a woman and I am strong. I will fight for the concord and solidarity of my tribes. I get off the pedestal, take off the crown and hold it in my hands.

"I'm the same girl. With or without a crown. With or without the word queen before my name. A simple girl that fate wanted to take her own family away and give her another. Long live my people," I shout and move towards the riverbank. The guests pass by me one by one and congratulate me. I stand there until the last citizen of the kingdom leaves.

~

"My Queen. Congratulations. I know that you will be a worthy successor of your parents," Nymphadora tells me as we stay just the two of us.

"Thank you very much, my beloved nymph. But I know I will never govern as efficiently as my father," I answer sadly.

"Don't say that. You will have all our help and I am sure you will excel."

"I wish my Nymphadora. I wish," I answer and head to the gate that leads to the palace. I want so much to take a hot bath and take off this dress. I think it's starting to itch me.

I enter the palace and head to my room. My parents' room, to be clearer. I take off my dress and get into the bathtub. I sit there for hours until my skin protests. *Act*. What exactly should I do now? Oh mom I wish you were here.

Finally, when I realize that it is already dark, I get out of the bathroom and get dressed. I sit on the bed and look at the armchairs opposite me. There, on the right, sat my dad with his constantly distraught mood and a pack of papers in front of him. Every afternoon my mom would come with two cups of tea and sit next to him. They may not have exchanged a single word with each other. She was reading her book and he was signing papers. But I knew, I felt it since then, that their love was real and unique. I remember myself entering the room like a tornado and starting to jump

around them to annoy them. They, unable to stand the fuss I made, shouted at my brothers to come and pick me up to play. Mom kissed me on the forehead and promised me in the evening to read me countless fairy tales. Dad lifted his gaze and replied sternly: "Don't inflate the child's mind with fairy tales. After all, they never really come true. Come here my Helada." I approached him and he would lift me up in the air and put me in his arms. "Did you do your homework?"

"Yes, daddy," I replied.

"Good. Once I'm done with my job, would you like us to go horse-riding?" I, without replying, happily kissed him on the cheek.

"I assume that this is a big yes. Go and play and as soon as I'm done I'll find you on the shore."

I was getting out of his arms and running towards my brothers who were already at the door. Eddi and Jacob each held me by one hand and I in the middle jumped up and rocked like a swing back and forth in the air. They were ten and eleven years older than me and they loved me and I loved them indescribably. They did me all the favors, as the younger sister that I was, and we spent endless hours together watching the frogs on the shore or playing hide and seek. I take a deep breath. Why did they make this trip? Why all of them? Why didn't they take me with them?

I remember three months ago that letter came. I wish I had burned it as soon as I saw it. I happily took it to Dad and he took it in his hands and read it. He immediately lost his color. He called us all in the dining room and told us what was written in it. There would be war! The elected tribal leaders wanted to claim part of the land of the Bosque Forest. Immediately my brothers offered to head to the Blue Sea where a first warfare was already taking place. The father agreed. The next day my siblings departed. It was the last time I saw them. A whole week passed. No one heard anything. No one had seen them. No trace of them. Then my parents, in their grief, decided to try on their own to search for my brothers. I begged my mom to stay with me. She, with tears in her eyes, caressed my hair and reassured me that everything would be fine. That they will come back quickly. She did not keep her promise. At first I thought they would come back, that everything was in my mind, that the premonition I had was fake. In vain I woke up every morning and waited on the bank until noon. I waited in vain until the evening. No trace of them. Messengers were sent

everywhere. Nothing. No news. Everyone was lost. is it possible? A whole army accompanied them. A whole caravan was always by their side. Experienced warriors...

Where are you? Even now I refuse to believe that they may have been lost. They may have been trapped somewhere. Did someone kidnap them? I get up from my parents' bed and look out the window. Make the decision Helada, you are the only one left with royal blood. *Queen Helada*. It sounds like a joke to me. I head to the desk, take the silver, light crown in my hands and put it on. I look myself in the mirror.

Queen Helada. The only hope of the place. But who will give *me* hope?

The room around us is golden from side to side. What we have just seen has left us with our mouths open. The people, the speeches, everything was alive in front of us. All golden, but alive.

"Sorry. I want to make something clear. Did we watch the coronation of Queen Helada? For real?" Caroline says enthusiastically.

"Exactly. I showed you through my memories the real events of the coronation," says Nymphadora.

"Yes, but we didn't see anything great. Just the queen greeting people and wearing her crown," Adrian says.

"I can only show you the facts that I was present myself. This scene is etched in my memory because it was the beginning of the reign of our beloved Helada. From a young age our queen was lovable. Everyone adored her. With the loss of her family, as you know, she passed into the adult world very abruptly. The events that are unfolding at this time are like a tangle in my mind so I will ask you to let me rest before I reveal to you other elements of the past," with these words, Nymphadora waves her hand and we return to the room with the paintings. The nymph gets up at once and flies down to the lower floor of the palace without saying a word more.

"That was unheard of," Daniel says.

"I've seen her in my dreams. I mean Queen Helada," I say thoughtfully. Everyone turns and looks at me. "And she spoke to me. Said Elli, have courage. She wore the same cape she wore at her coronation. It's the same one we found in Rubina."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" says Caroline, aggrieved.

"I didn't want to bother you again with my dreams," I reply. "The point is that ... she was murdered by Miedo in front of my eyes, on the same rock where I was the victim the previous times. Do you think it makes any difference that I had the dream just before we came here? Or does the cape play a role?" I ask, confused.

"Was it a coincidence? A game of your mind? A lot has been done in the last few days as well," Dora says.

"Maybe. I don't know. I just wanted to mention it."

"We'll analyze this issue later, my love. If the rest of you agree, of course. What concerns me now is what to do with the nymph. Should we force her to tell us exactly what we want or let her make the flashbacks at her past, thus prolonging our wait?" says Sylvia.

"Sylvia is right. We will connect the elements we have when we get a more general picture of things," Daniel adds looking at me. I shake my head. I feel deep inside me, though, that the dreams I've had are the key to opening the treasure chest. I don’t insist and I leave the group to continue its discussion.

I move away from the armchairs and descend the stairs. I want some time alone. I reach the ground floor and stand next to the huge palace library. *Elli why are you so selfish? The others are right*. Because I am tormented by these dreams. The cliff, the cape, these yellow eyes and hooked claws, the feeling of losing stable ground under my feet, the words of the queen. Everything. There is a connection. *Yes, Elli, you always think the same thing but you are still at zero*.

I grab the masterfully carved wooden handrail and with its help I sit on the landing. I look at the beautiful library that reaches up to the ceiling. It is divided into types of books. Fantasy, Mystery, Crime, Romance, History, Autobiographies, Novels taken out of life, about magic and many more that I see for the first time in my life. I take from a shelf next to me the first book I see in front of me. I open it and bring it close to my face. Its smell is intoxicating.

"They say that those who smell the books treat them with reverence as if they are holding a baby." I lower the book at my feet and look at Shawn as he stands over me.

"And who says that?" I ask him as he sits next to me.

"You know... people like me," he says with a laugh. I reciprocate his smile.

"What did you finally decide?"

"We decided to wait, see what Nymphadora has to show us and then act accordingly," he says and shrugs.

"I agree." I answer and look at him. I want to ask him so many things but the first thing that comes to mind is to clarify the situation between us.

"Elli?"

"Shawn?"

We say at the same time.

"You first." The thoughts I'm having these days come out of my mouth without thinking.

"I just feel that there is a distance between us lately. Is something wrong?" Shawn looks at the entrance of the palace with an unreadable look.

"Is there something going on between you and Adrian?" he finally replies after a long time of silence. The tone of his voice is intense. He has clenched his fists and is not looking at me. Inside me I jump with joy. Externally, however, I keep my face serious. I don't answer him, I just leave the book in its place and turn towards him. I extend my hand and grab his. I know what he's been through with Vivian, and I wouldn't want to hurt him like she did. His fist opens and our fingers tangle with each other. I look at him and my heart loses a beat as he turns his head and looks me into the eyes.

"If you asked me how many times you crossed my mind in the last few days, I would answer you only once," I tell him and he hesitantly pusses away from me. I smile sweetly looking at our joined hands. "Because you never really left," I add. Shawn then brings his finger to my chin and gently lifts my head. His gaze descends to my lips. I look at him with a challenge. He is getting closer to me. I smile faintly. His

gaze remains locked on my lips. He touches my cheek. I feel the point where his hand comes into contact with my face turn red. He pushes aside a lock of my hair that has fallen in front of my eyes. Carefully. Slowly. He tracks its progress as he places it behind my ear. He approaches his face closer to me and smiles. Oh my... I love his smile.

"I envy the stranger who accidentally sees your eyes and falls in love with them," he says and his gaze returns to my eyes. I get lost in his own and feel the storm in which I am being dragged. But I leave my protective board and head fearlessly inside it. In a fraction of a second, he closes the distance between us. His lips are on mine, but he stops abruptly. He looks at me as if he is asking me if he can continue. Before I can completely lower my head, he kisses me again passionately. I lose track of time. I put my hands behind his neck and pull him closer to me. His scent... vintage books and roses lure me into unknown worlds. His hands hug my waist making me tiny. His lips are now descending to my throat, but suddenly a sharp cough is heard from someone behind us. At first I think it's just my idea, from the intensity of the moment. But then I listen to him more intensely, I don't want to distance myself from Shawn but curiosity wins me over. I turn my head red and breathless. Two steps above us stands an angry Adrian with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Nymphadora wants us all in the gallery room," he says. Before he turns to leave, the look of betrayal painted on his face does not escape me.

Chapter 13 ♛

I wake up to a loud knock on my door.

"Yes?" I say without opening my eyes. The door opens and Nymphadora enters.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, my queen, but some representatives of the tribes have come and want to see you," says the nymph hurriedly.

"So early? Couldn't they wait for dawn first?"

"They say it's urgent."

"Okay, I'm coming." The door closes again and I'm left alone. I get up slowly and head to the bathroom, rubbing my eyes. I look in the mirror as I pour some water on my face. What could this visit mean? Nothing like this has happened before, and the tone of the nymph's voice brings anxiety to me. I comb my hair and run it in front of my right shoulder. I come out of the bathroom and at once my eyes fall on the crown that is fixed like an ornament on my bedside table. I have not worn it even a day after my coronation and I believe it is the main reason why my people accepted me.

Seven peaceful years have past in Universo, but there has been no news regarding my family. The only thing that boosts my morale is that, at least, I have managed to gain the respect of my people. Celebrations and joy dominate wherever I go, which now brings a smile to my face. Over the years, I have matured and managed to understand the right way to govern. My main goal is for the tribes to live united. This was and remains my vision.. The tribes live like siblings. United. That was and remains my vision.

I quickly put on a golden, simple dress (I never liked exaggerations) and go down to the ground floor where eight people from the four tribes are waiting. A man and a woman of each, as the law stipulates, who bow at the same time as soon as they see me.

"What happened?" I ask them immediately. I look at each one individually but their eyes don't lift off the floor. They are serious, but I feel that they are afraid to talk about the reason for their arrival.

"Sorry for the inappropriateness of the hour, our Queen. Could you give us some of your time?" says the representative from Lumina finally.

"Of course. Come with me," I answer and lead them to the secret conference room, the location of which changes every day inside the palace to avoid leaking information and documents. This time it is located next to the dining room. We all enter and sit in a circle at the table in the center.

"Well? Tell me." The Oscura's representative coughs dryly before speaking.

"My Queen. Let me explain to you the reason for our visit. As you know, hostilities between our tribes have ceased to exist for many years for the good of Universo but also as a sign of respect for the loss of your family. We try to avoid conflicts and live harmoniously. In the last few days, however, strange events have been taking place in our cities and we do not know their cause. The tribes have begun to blame each other."

"Like what strange things are happening?" I ask with curiosity. The representative of Grisa speaks next.

"Fires break out in Grisa without cause."

"Oscura is affected by earthquakes," says its spokeswoman.

"Rubina is flooded," the representative adds, raising his hands in despair.

"And Lumina is facing merciless hurricanes," the tribe's envoy finally says, lowering her head in distress.

Nature repays us for the arrogance we showed her sooner or later, I think to myself. The balance was lost from the moment the first conflict took place, and the selfishness of some people angered God. Love your neighbor, don't ask for more than you need, be grateful for what you have, live in peace, avoid showing jealousy, ingratitude, malice towards your fellow human beings. We are all human of course and we make mistakes. But you can't repeat the same mistake. The second time you do it, it will no longer be a mistake but a choice. The balance of Universo is its people, it is the relationships that people create with each other, it is the flora and fauna. They are the stones that unite its different parts. It is... Then the worst scenario that could happen comes to mind.

"Wait for me here please. Nymphadora, treat our guests to something until I return," I say and immediately get up from my seat. My mind is buzzing with thoughts flying to different conclusions. I come out of the office like a tornado and head to the secret

crypt. I open the door and go out to the Enchanted Forest. I take a breath, raise my hands and summon the four powers I bequeathed from the dynasty of kings. Lava, crystals, healing and darkness. Everything around me takes on the four shades of the tribes. I close my eyes and with a blast of the wind the four pockets of the stones appear in front of me. EMPTY. Panic overwhelms me. But how is it possible? It doesn't... But... I can't think. My mind is emptying like the cases of stones. I close the crypt and return to the room panting. I sit half-heartedly in the chair, pale. How can I say what I refuse to believe? What I don't want to believe. I raise my eyes in confusion. Everyone looks at me in wonder.

"What happened, my queen?" Nymphadora asks me.

"I want the composure of all of you. What I am going to tell you right now will stay between us. Until the problem is solved, I don't want anyone else to know," I say and mentally sink into my seat. I wish Universo would open up to swallow me right now. Everyone is shaking their heads now and i take a breather.

"The four stones disappeared," I say at once.

The turmoil that prevailed for a long time afterwards was accompanied by the voices of one covering the other, making my heart beat faster. As soon as I find my courage I say calmly: "Stop. There's no point in fighting."

"How did this happen, my queen?"

"What are we going to do now?"

Everyone asks me questions that I don't have the right answer to. "I want, I repeat, for you to promise me that you will not talk to anyone. Only we will know the real truth. I want you to assure your tribes that they do not have to resort to conflict. We will all find a solution together. I will look into how and why the stones were lost and let you know at our next meeting." I get up, bow my head in greeting and walk out of the room. I wish to my Saints that this solution will be found quickly.

The next day is like an uncontrollable monster that leaves nothing behind but debris and destruction. The nymphs and I searched everywhere. Panic has gripped us. It is out of the question that any of us did it. Something strange has happened. Who was

able to break the spell? I raise my hands and call my forces. I lose contact with the ground and hover in the air. I am in front of four empty cases. I can't believe it. Out of desperation, I feel like crying. Oh mother what should i do? I close the crypt and return to the palace. After we searched the Enchanted Forest as well as the Boske Forest , I decided to visit the other kingdoms as well. I feel like this is how something can be found. *Nice, since you feel it my dear, then listen. Is your heart beating rapidly? If yes, then act.* I imagine my mother telling me.

I visit the palace's chapel, I take strength from my Saints and go down the stairs. I step out of the inner door of the palace to the bank and sit on a rock. I know that if I do not rush, soon everyone will know the truth. They will be disappointed with me. But the worst thing that will happen, is that nature will not find its balance and the disasters will continue. Kingdoms will dissolve, conflicts will flare up! I get up and head to Nymphadora's house. I want to hear her opinion. As soon as I reach her small door I knock gently.

"Yes?" her voice echoes from the background.

"Nymphadora, do you have some time to talk?" She opens the door panting.

"Of course, my queen," she says and closes the door behind her. We headed to the depth of the forest where most of the flowers, from which the nymphs come, grow. Colorful and with an indescribable smell may be able to bring a little joy inside me... Even for a while.

"I'm thinking of calling the council today," I tell her without looking at her.

"For what reason, my queen?"

"Listen to me Nymphadora. I trust you more than anyone. I know you love Universo and you would give your life for it. So, I want to ask you to undertake the preservation of the forest for as long as I am away."

"What are you saying? Where will you go? It's an honor for you to suggest it to me," says Nymphadora confused.

"You will find out in the council, my Nymphadora. And thank you so much for agreeing to help me."

"Always my queen," says the nymph and reassuringly takes my hand.

~

We took a walk through the garden. It is not the birth season yet and I may not be able to attend it, which saddens me a lot. When spring comes, it brings the greatest joy and celebration for the nymphs. Everything is vibrant, bright, peaceful. On the first day of the season, nymphs are born. The pollen of the flowers pops out of all the plants, and in a golden tornado, as if popcorn pops, the little ones appear. Whitewashed and tiny. The most magnificent sight I have seen in my life... In winter, however, those who have reached their mature age are lost with a blast of the wind along with their withered flower. Just as my family was lost, I think and breathe sadly. Nymphadora is the first inhabitant of Nympha (the village of the nymphs) so she is the protector of all of us. She's like the Papa Smurf of the forest. Everyone consults her and she is the mother of all. Her magic is ancient, so it keeps her alive. I don't know what I would do without her.

"You know, Nymphadora, life is even more difficult as you get older. As a child, I wanted to grow up quickly and get my father's wisdom, my mother's beauty, Eddi's strength, and Jacob's fluency. I wanted to prove to them that even though I was the youngest I was equally worthy to govern. I finally understand that the carefreeness of childhood is irreplaceable and we must enjoy it on time. Whoever is in a hurry to grow up loses the joy of carefreeness."

"My queen, every person is different. From a young age you had the kindness in you. You may have had to grow up quickly, but that didn't alter your character. You remain the same sweet kid who loved to hide in the trees and play chase with the butterflies."

I smile at this memory. I loved so much chasing them. I believed that if I caught them I could fly wherever I wanted in Universo. Regardless of the fact that at the time I did not know that I would inherit the power of kings. With this thought in my mind, I continued my walk with Nymphadora in the forest that has become my second home for so many years.

👑

"I invited you here today to announce my decision on the serious *issue* that has arisen," I say as I look into the eyes one by one the attendees in the chamber, which this time is close to my bedroom.

"The stones must be found as soon as possible. Your confidentiality is the key to maintaining the balance of tribal relations. In order to be able to restore balance to nature as well, I would like your help. I want a representative from each tribe to accompany me on the tour I will do in all the major cities of Universo. I want to see with my own eyes the damage that has been caused and calm spirits as much as I can. Thus, we may be able to shed some light on the case of the lost stones. Beware, however, they will not know that the ultimate goal of the trip will be to find the stones."

Everyone agreed with this decision of mine and each proposed a representative.

"I recommend my daughter, Vrisida. She is thirty years old, worthy and a strong warrior. She will be a very important help in your fight," says the Grisa representative.

"My son Alexander. He is of the same age with you, my queen. Robust and wise," says the representative of the Luminosos.

"My nephew, Leonidas, has been initiated into the art of war since he was a child. He may be only twenty-three, but he will defend you to the fullest if it happens to fall into an ambush," says the Oscuros' representative.

"I will propose my sister, Ariadne. She is twenty-seven years old and handles speech like a well-tuned machine. She will be very useful to you," adds the representative of Rubicundos.

"Well, I trust you that you made the right choices. In two days we will start our journey. I want you to let them know about the departure and emphasize that the tour will be open-ended, so they should have completed their obligations before we depart. Thank you for your time and I will keep you informed of the progress of events as I wish you to do while I am away. For any problems you will inform Nymphadora who will convey your words to me... Until we see each other again," I say, and as I get up everyone copies my move and then bows before me.

I finally leave the chamber that has created a feeling of suffocation for so long and taking deep breaths, I head towards my room. I close the door behind me and sit on the sill of my window. Anxiety has overwhelmed me as much as I don't want to believe it. The nymphs pass in front of me and greet me with a bow. I smile at them and reciprocate the greeting by titling my head. I imprint in my memory every image, every movement. It may be the last time I see this beauty, the living nature.

Loneliness is present more than any other time. I am in the position of my brothers and my parents. A journey to the save Universo. The beginning of the end or a new beginning? I wonder... I am afraid and I get upset at the same time with this weakness of mine. Come on, Helada, you can do it. *"Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore. At some point you will understand what you have lost and you will struggle to win it back. Only in this way will you be able to free yourself, otherwise I will crush you. The battle will be uneven but you will continue to fight. The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness."* My father's saying comes back to my memory; it was a piece of his favorite book. He always reminded me of it when he saw me in fear. *The enemy is your mind,* he was telling me seriously. *Boldness is your strength. You can win if you struggle. Your mind will, in the end, win. A happy ending takes effort and determination. And I know you have plenty of it*, he fills in at the end with a smile. My family's thoughts raise my spirit.

I get up and stand in front of the mirror. I see sadness in my eyes. I wish my reflection could be completed by four other people. I sit on the floor and look at myself closely. My blond hair falls like a torrent over my shoulders. I'm so tiny. If I unfold my arms, though, I grow bigger. I never believed that my weight would affect the behavior of others in anything. From a young age my mother had eliminated this feeling. *Let them say they whatever they want, after all, are they carring your weight?* That was and is my strength. My honeyed eyes change. They become intense. My determination comes back. I get back on my feet. This is Helada. A young queen. The person they all rely on. Universo's only hope.

"It's time to prove it, then," I say loudly as I look in the mirror through the eyes of a warrior.

Chapter 14⚘

"And?", says Caroline excitedly.

"What and?" replies Nymphadora, tired by the effort. All this time the nymph stood motionless with her arms raised, waving them as if she were weaving in the air. The golden scenes succeeded one another, creating a dance of people, speeches and landscapes.

We are all in the gallery room and we cannot believe what we just saw. The stones were lost long before the tribes discovered it. I would not want to be in the position of Queen Helada under any circumstances.

"These are my last memories with our queen. In the following days, there was chaos with the preparations and meetings with the representatives. Her departure was very tearful and I would like not to share it with you," adds Nymphadora with a grimace of pain and touching her back.

"Yes, of course my Nymphadora and thank you very much for sharing these memories with us. But... if I may ask. How did Miedo get into the frame? And how did the disasters stop since the stones weren't found?" asks Sylvia, entering my mind.

"That's another story. I'll show it to you. One day... Oh I would like to let you know something else. I also discussed it with my sisters and we agreed that you can stay for as long as you want in the palace as long as you are very careful not to be seen by the master," replies the nymph and gets up from her swing in the center of the room.

"Thank you very much and of course we will be extremely careful," Caroline replies with gratitude. At least a part of our plan is achieved. The reason though, remains a mystery.

"You’re welcome. Now, if you allow me, I would like to rest a little," she says and heads towards the stairs.

"One last question," I say as I look at the nymph's back. I can't keep the question that has been spinning my mind all this time.

"Why did you show us all this? You don't know us so well. How can you trust us with your secrets so easily?" Caroline nudges me to stop talking. I risk our position and I

know it. But I can't hold back. The nymph turns and looks at me. Seriously and slowly she tilts her head to the right as if she is thinking and replies:

"I have my reasons... Elli." The way he pronounces my name makes me nod my head. Am I the reason? Why? With this answer, she turns and disappears in seconds.

"This was a very constructive afternoon," Daniel says after a while.

"Our key question remains though. Who is Miedo?" Dora says with a yawn.

"I don't know about you but I need some sleep. With a clear mind we can analyze the data tomorrow," Caroline adds.

"I agree," Dylan says, looking at her. His voice is heard for the first time in a long time, I think as my gaze falls on Caroline and then on Dylan. Oh boy.

"So have a good night," Adrian says, and stands up like a tornado, goes down the stairs and disappears in the blink of an eye. We all follow his example and get up from the comfortable armchairs. I turn my gaze and Shawn stands next to me. He smiles at me and extends his hand. I copy his movements and we descend the stairs together.

The events unfolded so quickly that I didn't think about what happened today. Shawn kissed me. *Me*. Shawn. Or did I kiss him? I don't remember. Something happened that I didn't expect to happen anyway and I feel... I don't know, my stomach tightened. Great, I don't think I'll sleep today. Well not that I slept yesterday but ok. *Elli, be serious, you're talking to yourself.* Yes, right.

We arrive outside my room and he kisses me tenderly on the cheek. I feel a fire flaring up inside me that I'm sure has been mirrored on my face. I say goodnight to him and give him my sweetest smile. Before I close the door of my room, however, I have not noticed the half-open door of Adrian's room, which also closes at the same time as mine.

🌹

"At least we can stay for as long as it takes. That way we will learn more," Dora says as she picks up a water lily from the shore. I look at the Glory team around me. Everyone sits on a rock and expresses their opinion on the matter of yesterday’s events. We are talking openly now. We don't have anything to hide anyway. With our

question about Miedo yesterday we made clear the reason why we came to the forest from the beginning. Although our exit from it remains a mystery.

"That's right, as if even if we wanted to, we could leave now," says Daniel with irony.

The morning before our meeting we talked a little bit with Caroline. Mostly about Shawn but also about other issues. Like how much we miss our families. She confided in me that Daniel, too, misses his parents a lot, but he plays the serious-guy so as not to show his sadness. I believe that everyone has a feeling of homesickness for their home. I sigh and smile at Shawn who looks at me with concern.

"We have to find the origin of the figure so everything will be solved, I believe," adds Sylvia.

"Do you think that even if we learn something, we will be able to deal with the darkness? Some little girls and some bullies?" Adrian asks with joy, pointing to us.

"If you can't help, it is betters to not talk," says Shawn indignantly.

"Let me remind you that you begged me to come. *You* came and found me, diamond kid. You need me," Adrian replies and looks at Shawn with flaming eyes.

"If it were up to me, we would never set foot on your filthy lair, selfish Oscuro," Shawn counters and clenches his fists.

"Well. I'd like to inform you of something." I jump up and say to stop the upcoming fight.

Why am *I* the one who always enters between them? I don't understand it. Is it an inner instinct? Or does my mind subconsciously want to tell me something? I just wanted to get their attention and in fact I have nothing important to say. Now what do I do?

"Yes, well," I say and look around. *Think Elli.* Everyone is looking at me impatiently.

"Good morning guys," a voice is heard behind us. I turn around and face Nymphadora, who appeared at the right time so save me. I take a breath of relief and smile. Fortunately, everyone has turned their gazes towards the nymph and say good morning to her. "I hope you all slept well."

"Magically," says Caroline, and I don't miss a sudden move made by Dylan. He has a notebook in his hands and writes something hastily as he looks at her. She turns her gaze and looks at me as if she senses that I want to talk to her with our eyes. I direct my gaze to Dylan, she turns her gaze and looks at him. He lifts his gaze and as it intersects with Caroline's he closes the notebook and looks elsewhere. Caroline turns her gaze back towards me, together we shrug in a sign of not knowing what is going on and at the same time we laugh restrainedly. From a young age we had whole dialogues with our eyes as our only weapon. I remember Daniel foaming out of his anger that he couldn't understand what we were saying.

"... in the houses of the nymphs?" Dora says at that moment, taking me out of my daydream. "I'd love to see how they're made."

"Then whoever wants is free to come with me," the nymph replies. To my great surprise even the boys eventually followed the little fairy. Curiosity, they say, is always more stronger than selfishness.

As we arrived at the Nympha the upheaval of the nymphs was evident. Something has happened but they are trying to appear calm in front of us. They whisper and fly in all directions like raging bees that have spotted an intruder in their hive.

"Anthi and Penelope, come a little closer," Nymphadora suddenly says.

The two fairies, as soon as they heard their names, flew towards their leader, who immediately took them aside. We, full of curiosity, paid attention to the movements of their bodies, since we could not hear their conversations. Every word of one nymph followed the other. Nymphadora rolled her eyes twice and finally looked at the two nymphs with the agony painted on her face. What happened again? After a while she finally came to us with her head down.

"Did something serious happen?" Caroline asks.

"I'm sorry for what I'm going to tell you," the nymph replies and raises her head.

"What happened? Tell us," I ask anxiously. I don't like the look on her face at all.

"Yes ehm," replies the nymph without meeting the gaze of any of us.

"*Tell us* Nymphadora," Shawn says seriously. After a few minutes of total indignation on our part, she replies:

"Some strange phenomena were observed in some areas of Universo."

"Like what kind of phenomena? In which areas? Oh, tell us, Nymphadora! We will die of suspense at last," says Dora indignantly.

"Earthquakes, floods, fires and hurricanes," replies the nymph and we all look at each other. It can't be, this is a mistake.

"In what areas?" asks Caroline with bated breath.

"In all the capitals and in some areas in the outskirts," the nymph replies. I don't feel my legs. I feel dizzy.

"Is it certain?" I ask, and the nymph nods. No one says a word. I am the one who breaks the silence by expressing in words the first thought that appeared, like a spark that comes up from two pointed stones, in everyone's mind.

"So history repeats itself."

"What are we going to do now? Our families are in danger," says Dora, ready to cry. Daniel comes close to her and after an internal fight puts his arms reassuringly around her shoulders. She, with tears in her eyes, lifts her gaze and smiles at him faintly with gratitude.

"We can't do anything..." I reply with sadness. We cannot get out of the forest but also if we could: how to deal with nature? "We just pray, everyone will be well."

At that very moment, a nymph passes really fast in front of us and whispers something to Nymphadora. She, with horror in the eyes, turns and looks at us.

"He mustn't find you here, quickly," she says and shakes her arms in panic.

"Who?" Adrian asks.

"Miedo..." Steps can be heard from the depth of the forest. The trees stand aside and large horns emerge from above. "They are coming," says the nymph with a sharp breath. Birds, nestled in the trees, fly away. Forest animals sensing danger hide in their burrows. Absolute silence reigns as heavy steps are slowly being heard approaching us. The nymph does not have time to cast the spell that made us invisible

last time as the monsters emerge in the village, so we enter running each one of the bigger mushroom houses to hide. They each serve as the kitchen, the cinema, the church, the theater, the greenhouse, the dance hall, the conference room and the group warehouse of the nymphs. I lift my head slowly and look out of the window. I see my friends, everyone in a little house, doing the same. The monsters are even more terrifying than last time. Higher. More menacing. Suddenly their master appears among them. A black floating dot in relation to its followers.

"My Nymphadora. I was looking for you," says Miedo with feigned sweetness.

"Yes, my master. Here I am," the nymph replies, looking at the ground.

"I wanted to congratulate you on the good work you did to the Casas of my Bestias. Well done, they assured me that they loved them," he says, and the monsters as if in a chord make bull sounds and fumes erupted from their plausible noses.

"Thank you master," replies the nymph and relaxes her shoulders slightly with relief. He looks at her with his bright eyes and his gaze in seconds acquires the harsh hue he always had. As if a switch was switched off and the light became dark again.

"But now why are you loitering?" His voice could crack even the most unbreakable mirror.

"What do you mean, master?" the nymph replies, trembling.

"Did you finish the preparations for the spell?" he asks, looking with satisfaction at the upset he caused to the nymph.

"Not yet master," the nymph replies, trembling.

"I want it to be ready by the afternoon. Tomorrow is the big day," says the figure triumphantly.

"Ok my master. What day, my master?"

"I'm not going to give you an account, Nymphadora, will I?" he says and turns to leave.

Suddenly he turns his head and smells the air. I start to tremble, quickly lower my head from the window, and as I sit on the floor I take deep breaths. Did he see me? I look back slowly towards the shore. Miedo is gone! I look right, I look left. Nothing.

But where did he go? Only his monsters have remained stagnant like statues. I hear Nymphadora's voice: "No master is no one in there." The door opens wide and I am again confronted with these two bright eyes that have haunted my sleep for a month.

"And here's the last ingredient I needed. Thank you my Nymphadora for keeping it for me. Now I'm taking over," he says and comes towards me, not letting me out of sight. I get up slowly and the words come out of me like a whisper.

"I'm not going to go anywhere with you." He looks at me as if he's mocking me. As if I'm his toy that he had lost and now he's found it again and wants to play. I try not to shudder but as he approaches me I feel the fear penetrating my bones. I can't control my trembling. *Come on Elli, pull yourself together*. He raises his hand and these hooked claws appear again in front of me. With one movement he grabs my arm and holds it tightly.

"I don't remember asking you. But I think, now that I see you up close, that you are a little pale. A good nap will help you feel better," he says and I immediately begin to pull away, in vain, trying to free myself. I can't get out of his grip.

"Leave me now. Leave me or else..." I don't have time to end my threat as he puts the claws of his other hand on my eyes. I suddenly feel like I'm falling. I'm falling off a cliff. A voice. Someone is screaming. But I fall into a deep nightmarish sleep.

Chapter 15 ♛

The day has arrived. I'm departing from the only place I have ever met. From my home. I turn my head as the carriage moves away from the magic bank, from the crystal palace, from my shelter. Before I left I greeted the nymphs, my beloved Nymphadora and every creature that gives life to this forest. With the tears of our farewell, I sealed the entrance of my palace to avoid unwanted visitors. I know that my return is not a sure thing, that's why I even absorb the smell of wet soil in my memory. The royal guards have surrounded my carriage and I know that they can protect me if necessary. But why do I have a feeling that something bad is going to happen? Is it because of my experience with the loss of my family? Or am I really that pessimistic? Come on Helada, calm down, this will end soon, I tell myself. I take one last greedy look at the Enchanted Forest and mentally say to myself... "Goodbye."

~

The road to the capital of Lumina is quite bumpy. The wheels of the carriage rattle on the stony ground forcing the horsemen to slow down. However, the hooves of the horses that beat rhythmically reduce my feeling of indignation and lull me. Outside my window are passing by blooming gardens and tall trees that touch the sky. It's winter but there's no trace of snow. A white butterfly joyfully flutters its wings and stands on my window. I raise my hand and as if it understands my intention it climbs on my finger. Before the disappearance of the stones all Universo was dressed in white, like this butterfly. My favorite color. However, after the announcement of natural disasters by the representatives... *puff* within a day the snow evaporated. I have to find the stones. My people are in danger. Will I be able to restore balance in nature again?

As if in response, the atmosphere around me suddenly changes. The sky darkens and a deafening sound tears the air. The butterfly, sensing the danger, flies away and I, follow its path, look out of my window upset. The carriage comes to an abrupt stop. Voices are heard from the guards around me. I let out a cry of anguish as the carriage tilts dangerously to the right. I look in horror at a half-broken floating bridge holding back half the carriage.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?" I shout anxiously watching the edge of the carriage hover over the cliff.

"The bridge is falling apart, my queen. Be patient, we will get you out of there," the voice of Vrisida is heard from my left, a beautiful brunette girl with brown eyes and a toned body.

I hear panting all around me, horses neighing angrily, voices. I can't sit idly by! I open the carriage door without thinking and try to get out, but my feet don't touch solid ground. There is no escape. The moment I try to put my feet back in the carriage it rolls further to the right, dragging me towards the cliff. I scream as I slide out of my seat and grab myself by the open door. I cry out for help, desperate, close my eyes and pray to be saved from this situation. I open them and look down in panic. I see a huge stream splitting the steep cliffs in two. Wild beauty that can lead me to my death.

"My Queen, catch," says after a while Ariadne, who is blonde, sweet but also very tall, throwing me a rope. I try to move my body but it doesn't hear me. I'm hooked on the doorknob and I can't let go.

"I can't," I answer her breathlessly.

"You can, my queen. You are very strong and you know it. You were able to govern on your own at a very young age. Make your people happy. Do not deprive us of your presence. We need you," Ariadne adds encouragingly.

I nod. Okay, I can do it. Behind Ariadne, Vrisida, Leonidas and Alexander appear in turn, holding the rope. I make a movement to the right, trying to grab the rope with the push I get. Like a swing I say to myself. Ha, as simple as that. However, as soon as I attempt to move, the door comes off one of its two hinges, causing me to literally hover over the cliff. I scream in fear and try to climb onto the door. I am bathed in cold sweat but a gentle breeze that starts to blow makes me feel better. But the breeze suddenly grows stronger and whistles in my ears.

"My Queen? Fly. You can do it," the voice of Leonidas, a handsome black-haired man with big arms, is heard. I isolate the sounds in my mind so that I don't hear anything. I calm down, I take deep breaths. I am Queen Helada. So, I can fly. That's right! How did I not think about it in the first place? But I need both my hands free to make it happen. If I could release just one...

"Hold on, I came up with an idea," Alexander tells the others, a beautiful boy with glasses and sloppy brown hair. He creates diamond swords and joins them together creating an alloy of crystal, cuts a piece of fabric from his blouse, wraps the alloy and stretches it towards me. I try to reach it but as soon as I succeed its edges, although covered with fabric, cut off my hands.

"It doesn't work," I say gasping.

"We have to hurry. Look..." says Ariadne in a panic. I turn my head and terror overwhelms me. The wind becomes stronger and a merciless hurricane emerges through the foliage. It sweeps away anything in its path, uproots entire tree trunks and looks like a wild animal that arrives to grab its prey.

"Give me the rope," Alexander says urgently. Everyone with wide eyes obeys and he ties one end around his waist and the other around a rock at the beginning of the bridge. I watch in fear as the hurricane approaches. We will not catch up. Alexander stabilizes his feet in the notches of the rock and begins to descend.

"NO, go back, you won't make it," I say as the hurricane reaches the other end of the bridge.

"I'll make it, my queen," he replies, as he descends the rock, reaching the height I was at.

"Give me your hand," he says, and even though I see the fatigue in his eyes he gives me his most encouraging smile. Making one last oscillation, I grab his hand just before the carriage falls off the cliff. I look down and disappear into his arms as I tremble in shock. I raise my eyes and look at him. The glasses give his face maturity and his green eyes make me reminisce the Enchanted Forest and its dreamy shore. He looks back at me respectfully and only then do I realize that I am glued to him, his hand hugging my waist and the two of us being above the brink of the hill.

"Are you okay?" he asks anxiously. I feel like I've blushed and it's not from the intensity of the moment. He, while hanging from the rope with one hand and holding me with the other, behaves as if he is holding a soft feather so reverently that he is careful not to lose it.

"Yes, I'm fine," I say and try to avoid his gaze by turning my attention to the other end of the bridge. That's when I realize something. There was no trace of the hurricane. It had simply disappeared!

👑

I hear a strong cough over my head and when I look up I see three people looking at me with wonder.

"My Queen, do you want to climb up?" Vrisida asks meaningfully. I look around in bewilderment. I am still in Alexander's arms. I blush all the way to the ears and it is reflected in his beautiful eyes. How long have we been stuck like this with each other?

"Yes, of course," I say and try to calm my heart that beats at the same rhythm as his. I make a move right and he does the same. Left again and he follows me.

"Half a minute to—"

"Do you have to—"

One interrupts the other. I have my hands on his chest and he moves his on my waist.

"If you release your hands, my queen, you can just fly, if you want to of course," says Ariadne with a smile up to her ears. Let Universo open in two and swallow me at last!

"Yes, of course," I repeat like a robot. I release my hands and take deep breaths to calm down. "Ok I'm ready, you can leave me," I say and I look him in the eye for the umpteenth time.

"Do you feel ready?" he asks lost in my gaze.

"Yes, now it would be a good time," I answer him although inside me I would like to stay like this forever.

"So, I count until three..." he says as he shakes his head. He counts down and I stretch out my arms, take a breath and summon my strength. In seconds I left his warm embrace and hover in front of him over the cliff.

He winks at me and says, "See you at the top," hastily adding, "My Queen," as if suddenly remembering his place. I smile at him and fly towards the others without

looking down. To my great surprise, when I finally touch solid ground, he has already climbed the cliff before me and is standing serious and waiting for me. Impressive!

"Is everything all right, my queen? How do you feel?" asks Vrisida.

"I feel perfectly fine," I say avoiding their gaze. "Now that my life is not in danger, I mean."

"We are very happy to hear this," says Leonidas, looking at me with bright eyes. That's when I realize that everyone's eyes move one moment towards me and the next towards Alexander, who now stands like a pillar of salt staring into the void.

"Good." I say seriously to restore order. "First of all, I want you all to call me Helada from now on. I do not want the words *my Queen* to come out of your mouth again. It has begun to get on my nerves." Everyone responds to my suggestion with a nod. I notice that Alexander's was sharper than the others and he still hasn't turned his gaze to look at me.

"And secondly, can someone explain to me what happened? The hurricane? The bridge?"

"I can, my que—," says Ariadne and seeing my expression immediately adds "Sorry, Helada," she corrects not being able to get used to the sound of my name as it comes out of her lips. It's been a long time since I heard someone say my name... I can say that I missed it. Formalities were never to my taste.

"I think that the bridge must have been destroyed because of the merciless hurricanes that hit the Lumina areas in recent days. We did not correctly calculate the extent of the disaster. My quee— Helada and we apologize for the danger we exposed you to," Ariadne says with the remorse painted in her eyes.

"I forgive you, since no one was injured, let’s forget what happened," I reply to her, putting my hand reassuringly on her shoulder. That's when, for the first time since the incident, Alexander raises his gaze and looks at me. The expression that his face gets is unfathomable. I wish I could read his mind right now.

"The only question that remains is: Why did the hurricane retreat?" asks Leonidas thoughtfully.

"It is not normal for a natural phenomenon to disappear suddenly," adds Vrisida.

"I'm afraid we won't find the answer to this question. Today at least," I say as I head to the edge of the cliff and look down. The carriage I was in a few minutes ago is now on fire.

"Since my carriage was destroyed we will have to camp somewhere for tonight so that I can build a new one," I say indignantly. Another futile day. Another night to no avail.

👑

I sit by the fire and look at the sky. The stars shine as the clouds chase one another around them. The moon is almost full, crimson as if it is bleeding. It makes me wonder if it empathizes with the imbalance that prevails in Universo. Has this also sunk into the sorrow of jealousy and selfishness? The silence in the forest is present and the only sound that can be heard is an old owl whose huge eyes follow my every move. The horses stand proudly and awake around me, being our guardians.

A few hours ago I was able to create, finally, with the dried leaves, the fallen tree trunks and alloys from my strength, a new carriage. Not as aristocratic as the previous one, but at least functional, which is waiting for its next mission. The guards set up the tents in a circular formation under dense foliage to avoid unwanted attacks, and now one of them is standing behind me keeping a watch. The rest exhausted as they were said goodnight to me and took refuge in their tent. So I am now alone (or rather almost alone, since the guard behind me makes his presence with a sneeze) in the accompanied by the moon. I loved looking at the stars from a young age. Many people have called me romantic, but I always replied that:

"Admiring something elusive can be your guide to something tangible. The stars are planets, they are beacons, but also an opportunity to dream."

I close my eyes and smile at the sky. I hope it will be my compass to discover the truth about my family and lost gems, as well as my beacon to show me where to look. I open my eyes abruptly because suddenly I hear speeches behind me. As soon as I turn my head, I see Alexander talking quietly with the guard who is doing the night watch. He hasn't noticed me yet but when his gaze falls on mine he turns his head abruptly towards the guard and bids him goodnight in a hurry. Before he can return to his tent again, I shout at him: "Alexander, come closer if you may?"

As soon as he hears his name he stands still with his back turned towards me as if he is wavering whether he should approach me. Eventually he turns and comes towards me. I motioned for him to sit down and he obeyed with a nod. I look at the fire and he, while I feel his gaze hot as lave on me for a long time, finally follows my movement.

"What do you want from me, my queen," he says, not turning to look at me.

"What did I tell you? I'm Helada." I tell him with a smile. "I wanted to ask you what you think of the stars."

"What do you mean?" he replies in earnest.

"I mean looking at the sky what pops on your mind?" in this answer of mine he holds his breath, he looks at the sky and after thinking a little he shows a certain point of the sky and says:

"Whenever I look at the sky my eye falls on the constellation of our tribes, which creates a huge star," he replies and follows his course with his finger. "Five stars, like our four tribes and you who rule them. I think that if the constellation stays there then so does the hope for concord. Although I'm a warrior, I do not support the concept of war. I believe it is a meaningless ploy to impose force against the weak. If the human mind was not broken down into machinations and jealousies, I believe, it could thrive. Dialogue can unite us as the stars are conceivably united in the sky," he says and as soon as he finishes he shrugs indifferently. "I don't know my view may sound utopian but..."

"No, don't say that. I understand what you mean," I reply and look at him in surprise. I didn't expect him to answer me, let alone connect my thoughts so perfectly with his. Now that we are so close, I take the opportunity to better observe his features that are strongly erased under the flames. His brown hair is sloppy and falls on his glasses. He is fit and this can be seen even in the semi-darkness under the black blouse he wears. He is good looking, indeed. My gaze falls on his lips which are well-shaped and… Whoa, wait. No, no, no. I turn my head abruptly back towards the fire. He notices my move and looks at me.

"Are you okay?" he asks me with wonder. I don't turn my head. I refuse to make the same thought.

"Yes, I'm fine and thank you for today by the way, but I'd better go, we have a big trip tomorrow." I reply hurriedly and get up to leave. He raises his hand and grasps my wrist. An unbearable heat flares up inside me and it's not because of the fire. I look at him and after seconds that seemed like a century to me he says: "I would do anything for you. Good night... Helada."

"Good night Alexander," I reply to him with a smile. I'm almost running as I make my way to my tent. I do not notice either the faint, cunning smile of the guard as I pass by him nor the gaze of Alexander which is pinned like an arrow on my back. All I see, as soon as I enter my tent, is my anxious face reflected in the mirror next to my bed. Before I cover myself with the blankets I wish inside me that I did not feel what I think I felt and I closed my eyes tightly so as to manage to calm my troubled heart.

Chapter 16⚘

I feel a sudden nausea as I open my eyes. I don't remember where I am. My legs are heavy and I can't move them. I touch my head dizzy and look around me. I cannot see anything; the deep darkness has swallowed every source of light. The sleep I had was unsettled again. The queen's brown, like honey, eyes full of despair have been etched in my memory like a dagger wound. *Again,* she asked for my help, *again* I stood idly by. Fear paralyzed my legs, as now for some reason. Why can't I move my legs? I lower my hands and grasp my ankles which are tied with very heavy chains. Where am I? My eyes are trying to get used to the darkness and my mind to realize my situation. I am sitting in a very narrow space, as if in a cage. I can't move my body and wherever I touch there are railings. So it is a cage indeed!

Suddenly a scream is heard and makes me lose a beat from my heart. I look more closely around me. What I see is definitely a forest, yes the trees are evident. But what was that sound? The trees begin to move. But how is it possible? As soon as I understand what I see in front of me I make jerky movements trying to break my bonds, to get as far away from this place as I can. But the closer it gets, the more I get injured in trying to escape. Now it is just a few steps away from me. His eyes shine brighter as soon as he arrives in front of me. Yellow, big, evil. Behind him, through the foliage, the huge bodies of his followers can be seen.

"I see you finally woke up. With such an unstable sleep you had, I thought I should keep you locked up until the next full moon," he says with a smile.

"Let me go," I reply, feeling vulnerable in front of him. His gaze scans every part of my body.

"I think you have understood so far that this will not happen. In the near future I mean," he says with irony and rests his hooked nails on my cheek.

"You're a monster," I reply, pulling my face as far away from him as possible.

"Thanks for the compliment. You can call me by my other names, such as: Fear, Terror, Nightmare, Miedo..." he says calmy, listing them with his fingers.

"Well, it's time to end this pleasant little chat," he says after getting abruptly serious. He turns his back towards me and raises his hands.

"My friends, the time has finally come. This moment we have been waiting for so many years." The Bestias responded with cheers of approval (like the sound that I heard as soon as I woke up) and hitting their huge feet on the ground.

"The last ingredient is in our hands and the solution to our confinement has been found. For so many years, as you know, only my shadow has been able to come out of this *cursed forest*. But today the moment of liberation has come for all of us," he concludes and everyone cheers his triumphant speech."

So *he* was the cause of the fire in the village of Dora. Now there is no doubt. Judging by the effect of his shadow energies, I can't *even* think of what using all his power by him can do to the whole of Universo.

"Ouch." Something hits the back of my head hard. Miedo turns annoyed that I interrupted his triumphant speech and I smile at him encouragingly to continue. As soon as his attention returns to his monsters again, I turn my head and my lips touch my eyes with joy. Just behind me in the trees I can see black tufted hair... Caroline! She brings her finger to her lips, commanding me to remain silent and with a movement of her head she disappears back, in the shade of the trees.

"I want all of you to be very careful. No mistakes must be made. All united we will make it." With a nod of his head one of the Bestias takes a huge step forward and opens his palms in front of his master revealing a series of strange objects. Miedo then takes the objects one by one and places them in a circle around his legs, naming each one.

"A leaf from the Enchanted Forest, symbolizes the magic of our world. A piece of rock symbolizes the constant power of the Boske Forest. The heart of a nymph symbolizes obedience to the powerful. Pollen from the plant that spilled its blood, Helada, symbolizes the perishability of human nature. And finally..." He turns towards me. Approaching. He violently grasps my hand and before he can get what he wants from me a diamond arrow is pinned to the center of his chest. In the center of his cold and ruthless heart.

An eerie laugh suddenly comes out of his mouth. So terrifying that I am immediately trying to pull my body as far away as I can from this beast, closing my ears with my hands. I can't stand it. I am sure that this laughter will haunt my dreams from now on. With a sharp movement he removes the arrow from his chest without spilling a trickle of blood. My eyes open wide. Not only he is the personification of evil, but he is also immortal? With hatred, he breaks the arrow in two, as if it were a simple twig, and throws it on the ground.

"Tell your friends that no matter what they try to do, I will take what I need from you," he says and bares his shiny white teeth towards me, revealing two pointed fangs. He approaches me again and then behind him, through the forest, a familiar voice is heard.

"I don't think so," says Shawn and appears as a hero from fairy tales. He's beaten but that doesn't stop him from throwing his arrows in front of my cage like rain. Behind him, Sylvia fires jets of lava that clings masterfully to the arrows, creating a barrier between me and Miedo. This laughter again. Let this torment stop.

"I'm going to have a lot of fun tonight," Miedo says, and makes a nod to his Bestias, which begin to head towards my friends. The Glory come out one by one from various parts of the forest taking up battle positions. I have to get out of here. I have to save them. There must be something that I'll be able to do.

Concentrate Elli. I seek peace within myself even if it does not exist in reality. I take deep breaths and close my eyes. Now I'm alone in the woods. I open my palms over the chains and suddenly hot lava comes out of my hands. I am amazed at this unprecedented power that I possess and I look with admiration at the reddish, viscous lava that flows over my hands. I finally steer it over the chains, which break with one click. Miedo turns and looks at me but the wall that has been created prevents him from seeing my legs. I smile at him with irony and he turns, leaves me behind, heading to the opposite side of the forest, to the place where at the moment my friends are struggling to save me.

With quick movements I melt the lock and get out of the cage. Everyone has their attention focused on the impending battle, so I take careful steps back, towards where I saw Caroline standing a moment ago. With two strides the intense foliage swallows me. Two sturdy hands grab me by the shoulders and before I can scream they turn me around and shut my mouth. Relief overwhelms my body, so much that I momentarily lose my balance. He hugs me tightly, holding me upright. Who would have expected that I would feel so safe in the arms of an Oscuro! The same relief is reflected in his eyes and as he holds me in his arms I feel that he is holding his breath too, so as nothing can disturb the situation we are in. I lift my head and look at him more closely. His face is a little swollen on his right eyebrow and he has a cut on his lips. But before I can open my mouth to ask what happened to him, screams are heard from the opposite side of the forest.

Terror overwhelms me... Caroline. Adrian grabs my hand and we run together to the place where the voice was heard. Behind the pitch-black shadows of the trees, I finally see the whole gang fighting the monsters. That's my fault. They all hold something to defend themselves but all they manage to do is fill themselves with bruises and blood. The Bestias with a single movement throw my friends in the air one by one. That's when I see Caroline's motionless body on the ground. I let out a scream like a wild animal and run towards her.

"No Elli wait..." Adrian shouts behind me.

The Bestias are trying to catch me, I unleash whatever power I find inside me and alloys of lava and diamonds make a barrier around us. Not a barrier, but a *sphere*. An indestructible sphere that encloses my friends and will not let anyone hurt them. The Bestias forcefully hit their fists against the sphere, in vain. Right now, I see nothing but Caroline's motionless body. All I'm interested in is making sure my sister is okay. I fall to my knees.

"Caroline?" I say as I take her face in my hands. She does not move, she has scratches everywhere and a deep cut on the forehead. She’s so fragile. And it's all my fault! If I were more careful, Miedo wouldn't have discovered me. Daniel holds his tears back as he stands next to me.

"Come on Caroline, please," the tears are falling like a storm now from my eyes. Some touch her flawless face. She begins to move her fingers and after a while she slowly opens her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" she says and tries to smile. I let out a cry of relief and take her in my arms.

"Everything is fine," I tell her and help her get back on her feet. I lift my gaze as I stabilize Caroline and look around, as if I had just woken up from deep slumber. I observe each one individually. Daniel has a tear on his thigh, and Shawn has one eye swollen (but the mark doesn't look recent) and smiles reassuringly at me. Dylan holds his shoulder which appears to have come out of its place, and Sylvia fortunately has nothing serious beyond scratches. Dora is on the back of Daroulis but she seams worried as she tries to reduce the blood to a deep wound in her abdomen.

"Dora, are you okay?" I ask her anxiously.

"Yes, yes en un minuto I'll be okay," she says, and with a grimace of pain she eventually joins the tissues of her skin. Adrian stands behind me with an expression of indescribable joy and winks at me. The fists continue to fall like rain on the sphere I built to protect us. Did I do that? , I think by observing my achievement.

"You will not escape forever little princess." Miedo's angry voice is heard behind me, and with a wave of his hand, he and his followers disappear like the sun behind the mountains at sunset.

🌹

"Well, do you know how to unravel what you did?" asks Adrian after a while, laughing.

I lift my head and look at the sphere. That's a very good question. Really, is it what I see my own creation? I look at Caroline. She seems to have escaped danger as she smiles at me broadly and impatiently. Okay. Everyone is unharmed, now what am I supposed to do?

"The truth is that no," I say thoughtfully. "Let me concentrate for a minute." I open my hands and close my eyes. I search within myself for inner peace. I am alone in the woods again. Alone in all of Universo. I feel the power awakening inside me. Then a deafening roar emerges from the depths of the forest. The wind that greeted me so many times and took me in his arms, is now coming at breakneck speed to help me. I shake my hands like a conductor who directs his orchestra. With a sharp movement I raise my hands high and the wind breaks the sphere and tears it to pieces. I take a breath and open my eyes. I am again next to my friendsbut suddenly my legs bend from exhaustion and sturdy hands try to catch me by the waist. A quarrel is heard next to me but I feel like I'm on the other end of the tunnel. The voices mingle inside my ears, buzzing from the pressure. I lose consciousness and even though it is dawn, the darkness takes me by the hand and closes my eyes.

~

I wake up in Queen Helada's bed, clean and rested. I look around and get up slowly in a sitting position. Was all this a dream, all that I went through? Or can it be? The question is painted on my face. Before I can get out of bed, the door opens and Caroline enters with a tray full of food.

"Don't get up, I brought you something to regain your strength," she tells me and comes next to me.

"And yes, all the things you think you dreamed of really happened." She sits next to me and offers me the tray. Listening to my stomach purring, I don't say a word and I start devouring what I see in front of me. As soon as I finish, I finally ask Caroline:

"Are you feeling better?"

"I'm as good as new. I should ask you this, though. You have stressed us all very much, I have to tell you, as soon as we saw you lose consciousness yesterday."

"I feel better now. Yesterday? I mean, do I sleep a whole day?" I ask her and open my eyes in surprise. She nods and adds:

"Since you have rested, I would like to remind you that you have many issues unsolved that need to be settled. Like your new power. That you are a princess. The boys who are constantly fighting for you." ,she says and smiles slyly.

"Wait one by one the problems please. What do you mean that boys are fighting for me? What happened again?" I ask her suddenly dazed.

"I knew this would get your attention. Well, I'll take things from the moment you disappeared. We were all hidden in the houses of the Nymphs when we saw Miedo coming out of which you were hiding and holding you in his hands unconscious."

The thought of Miedo holding my unconscious body makes me shudder.

"Seeing you in this situation we all panicked. I tried to calm the others, especially Shawn and Adrian, as they were ready to get out of their hiding places, waving my hands in a deterrent way in front of the window. I had the same longing to save you, but I knew it wasn't the right time. So as soon as you disappeared from the forest, Nymphadora immediately sent two of her sisters to follow you so that we could know where he intended to take you. We then discussed the way in which we could save you and made the plan. In the evening everything was ready and in the end the mission was crowned with success."

"Thank you so much for everything you did my Caroline. I will thank the others as soon as I see them too," I tell Caroline and hold her hands grateful for her composure. "One last thing before the rescue chapter closes. I saw brushes on Shawn’s and Adrian's faces that seemed old and that definitely weren't caused by the battle with the Bestias. So what happened to them?"

"Ah yes, you see they quarreled badly. They both wanted to be the heroes and couldn't work together. It was a very fierce fight, we couldn't separate them no matter what we did. In the end, Nymphadora put an end to the whole situation by erecting a wall of gold between them."

"In fact, another event for which I am responsible," I say sadly.

"Oh please. They behave like five-year-olds, it's not your fault but their minds," Caroline says and gives me a kiss on the cheek. Then, the other pending issues come to mind, the ones that need to be put in order.

"Regarding my strength, I have nothing more to tell you than you already know. I'm still discovering aspects of myself. And regarding the princess's address I don't think

it should be taken into account since it came from the mouth of a psychopathic, disgusting monster," I say and breathe indignantly.

"You're right. Let's leave it at that. Do you know how angry I was? When I saw you tied up like an animal in the cage? I wanted to rip off his flesh and make him eat it." At this threat of hers, we both laugh. Oh how I missed that laughter! Our joy is interrupted by a knock on the door and Shawn's brown head emerging from its opening.

"Can I interrupt?" he asks, and his smile brings butterflies to my stomach.

"Yes, of course," says Caroline, giving me a kiss and winking at me just before closing the door behind her. Shawn doesn't take a step to approach me, he just stands by the door and looks at me. I look at him too with eyes that shine. I missed him. I missed him so much even though it was just a day away from our previous meeting. His gaze descends to the floor melancholic. But what is happeneing? Did he regret our kiss? Does he want to tell me that he didn't like it? That he wants to...

"Sorry," he says, and my heart sinks into a deep well. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to save you," he says and avoids looking at me.

My heart now comes back to the surface of the water and floats. Relief overwhelms me and before I can think about it I get up of bed and fall into his arms. He holds me in his sturdy arms from the waist and sinks his head into my neck. I put my hands over his shoulders and we stay there hugging with our hearts beating rhythmically. I lift my head and look him in the eyes, bring my hand to his cheek and he tilts his head towards me.

"Thank you for being there when you needed to be. That's enough for me," I tell him and rest my forehead on his. He smiles at me with relief and looks at my lips.

"Can I kiss you again?" he asks me with restrained longing.

"You would have figured it out if the answer was no," I reply, and he joins his lips on mine. Two planets come together. Two hearts beat as one. And a kiss seals everything by creating a bridge between us. I pull him even closer to me. This kiss is tender, hiding love and understanding but also a small dose of passion and a promise. Many secrets will be revealed in the future but at this moment I live in the present. All I care

about is absorbing what Shawn has to offer me and giving it back to him. Understanding, tenderness, sincerity and mutual help are the virtues of love and I will try to become an ambassador of all of them, I say mentally within myself as I take a breath and Shawn closes, divinely, the distance between us once again.

Chapter 17 ♛

"What is your greatest fear, Helada?" my father suddenly asks me as we sit on the shore and feed our horses after riding.

"Why are you asking me this?" I say in wonder.

"I want you to be prepared. To know how to keep your fears in balance and someday to win them." I think for a while, although I know well deep inside me what this unwanted feeling can cause.

"I'm afraid... of failure and the loss of my people." I say and I do not look at him out of shame. I know that both are inevitable paths but this feeling of insecurity remains, no matter how much I want to refute it.

"Well... " he says, and he doesn't add no other word.

"Don't you have anything encouraging to say?" I ask him impatiently after a long pause.

"Daughter, you know very well that through our mistakes we learn. Failure is a sure factor in our lives. You also know that people at some point lose their material substance. Their souls, however, remain in the hearts of the people who are left behind. So the solution is obvious," he says and I am waiting for him to reveal it to me. I wait and finally understand what he wants to tell me.

"Every man is capable of everything. Even the petty fears of life can be defeated as long as we have courage and determination... But words are easy, and actions are difficult, father," I answer him through his own words that he whispers to me so many nights before I sleep. His silence for some reason reassures me, even though my fears I know will not disappear. It's his way of letting me do an introspection on my own and thus understanding myself better. His stoicism contrasts with my spontaneity and creates a loving relationship between us.

"The food is ready. I say it once and whoever heard it can come by," my mother shouts from the palace. My father and I laugh out loud. This phrase has become a tradition. You see, Eddi and Jacob wake up in the morning and disappear into the woods, often coming back at night. Mother has had many conversations with them but they, having shooting as a hobby, lose track of time and along with the time the meals

of the day. I wonder what they feed on and they are so gigantic. I get up and tie my horse, Lightning, a beautiful white horse, to the trunk of a tree. So does my father on his own black horse. He touches me tenderly on the shoulder and I turn around and look at him. In his eyes, mine are reflected. Identical and with the same love.

"In *everything* there is always a solution, my Helada. As long as you're brave and look for it," he hugs me and we head together to the steps of the palace.

As long as I am brave, I say to myself and follow in my father's footsteps with determination.

We are at the entrance to the capital of Lumina and one of my fears has surfaced. Fear of failure. Yes, Helada, who has so many different powers, is afraid to face her people. The horses stop as we reach the main square. I get out of my carriage and look around sadly. The fountain, that once decorated the central part of the city, has been destroyed with water flowing undisturbed throughout the paved road. The residents carry bricks trying to block its passage and restore the former jewel of their city. The houses are, fortunately, in better shape. It seems the hurricane was centered in their courtyards, as soil, gravel and beautiful flowers have been scattered along the entire length and breadth of the city. As soon as the residents become aware of my presence, they stop their strenuous work and bow.

"Please let us help you," I say and nod towards my guards. In people's eyes, all the pain and despair that can fit into a human heart can clearly be seen.

To my right I see a little girl sitting on the doorsteps of her house combing her doll, without paying attention to me. His mother tries to tidy up the yard of their house with dark eyes and heavy hands. I approach the girl, sit next to her and smile at her.

"What a beautiful doll you are holding!" I tell her but I don't get an answer. Around me a mass of people are trying to restore balance to the city. But not in my heart.

"Would you like my help in something? You or your mother?" I ask her and look behind me where the woman cleans her sweat and continues to pick up the remnants of destruction.

"No," she replies sadly. I don’t know what is appropriate to say and what is not. I touch her shoulder tenderly and understandingly, she turns her head and looks at me not with sadness, as I thought, but with... anger?

"It's *your* fault," she aggressively tells me.

"What do you mean?" I ask her stunned and take my hand away from her shoulder. "If you acted as queens supposed to act, none of this would have happened," she says standing up beside me and I follow her movement. She runs to her mother, who hugs her tenderly. She lifts her gaze and looks at me intensely, eventually tilting her head faintly. Then she takes her daughter by the hand and together they enter their house, leaving me to look at the door as it closes, crushing my heart. What did I do? She is right. All this destruction is my achievement. I *should* have been more careful. I *had* to protect the stones and by extension my people. I *should*... I sit with a heavy heart on the doorsteps of the house. I'm to blame for everything.

"Are you all right, my queen?" asks me a shadow over my head. With blurred eyes I lift my head and face Alexander. I don't even have the strength to refute my address as queen. What a ridiculous title. I try to hold back my tears and calm down. He sits next to me and looks at me in agony.

"Helada, are you okay?" he whispers in my ear. I can't answer because I'm going to risk sobbing out of my mouth instead of words.

"You're not well," he says, sensing my dilemma. He raises his hand and stretches it towards mine, wanting to calm me down, but just before I feel his tender touch, his gaze is detached from the figures around us. He thinks about it and pulls his hand away from me, letting me feel only a faint caress. The cold emptiness is present among us like a huge iceberg.

"Calm down. Everything will be fine. Already the biggest disasters have been sorted out," he says and tries to smile.

"Until the next hurricane," I say in a rough voice. He doesn't answer me. He knows I'm right.

"We will find a solution," he says, and despair overwhelms me. No we won't. I can't hold back my tears anymore. He realizes it and looking guiltily around him, he

stretches his hand again and touches my cheek. With his index finger he wipes my tears and I feel even worse than I did a moment ago. Before I can refute his gesture, an indescribable earthquake opens the earth in two and a roar is heard so loud that it shakes my whole body. Alexander rises abruptly and stands in front of me like a shield. But the hurricane is not given away to anyone and swallows us in seconds. Like the white shark devouring its prey in the blink of an eye.

His hug reassures my heart. My head rests on his chest and his hands hold me tightly against him. If this is the other world, I am very happy to have crossed it. My eyes are closed, bolted. I don't want to open them. I want to stay in this world forever. His hand circles my back, then climbs up my hair. I hold my breath. I want to keep in me the smell of sweet caramel and vanilla. His fingers touch my chin and force me to raise my head.

"Helada?" he says, and his voice is intoxicating. I smile with my eyes closed. I don't want to face the end, but I'm glad I'm living it with him. My hands are entangled around his waist. I rest my head on his chest again, smiling broadly.

"Helada!" he repeats more urgently and his body acquires a sharp tension. This time it is not a request but an indirect command.

"What's going on?" I ask worriedly and finally open my eyes. In bright daylight I can't distinguish his features, but I understand his discomfort. I guess I was wrong, I shouldn't let myself go, since I see that my feelings are leading to a dead end. I move away from his arms and look at the floor trying to reduce my heart rate. On the paved floor, full of gravel and... *flowers*. What the heck? I lift my gaze and come face to face with a large crowd of people who look at us with their mouths open. They bow before me and ask me if I feel well. Am I alive? Strange, there is nothing re-damaged around me. Did I imagine the hurricane?

"A miracle!" shout many of the residents, even the little girl beside her mother, who smiles and greets me happily.

"We are saved!" others shout.

"The queen saved us." I don't understand what they mean.

"They both saved us," they say and shake their hands with Alexander's, who looks around with wide eyes. Vrisida with the rest of the guards suddenly appear next to us and lead us discreetly to my carriage. They nod to both of us to get in and in a second the horses start with fast pace for a different Lumina's town.

As soon as we leave the city, the cheers and joyful voices of the residents become whispers until they finally disappear. My mind is a tangle of facts. I look out the window at the landscape alternating and try to think. I'm trying hard. Alexander sits opposite me silently. I don't look at him. It's better that way. Perhaps I can forget his presence. I feel, however, his gaze fixed on me at regular intervals. He doesn't address me, thankfully, so the journey becomes less painful. At some point the carriage stops for the horses to rest and its door is opened by Leonidas. Alexander descends first and extends his hand to help me get down the stairs. I do not accept it. It's better to avoid physical contact with him, lest I be able to gain my composure again. I feel his frustration like the intense fog after rain, but I am not intimidated. This is the right thing to do. While the guards offer the horses apples and plenty of water, I nod to the four representatives of the tribes to follow me in the shade of a tree. I don't know what to say to them. How to get started. What to ask. I open my mouth many times like the goldfish outside the fishbowl. I cannot formulate a single sentence.

"Let me tell you exactly what we saw," says Ariadne, getting me out of the awkward position.

"We saw you and Alexander cuddling into the hurricane and the hurricane embracing you equally. But instead of absorbing you and luring you away, it's as if you absorbed his power. So with a blast of wind, the hurricane turned into smoke. And the two of you remained tenderly embraced before the eyes of the inhabitants," she adds, smiling meaningfully. Just perfect, I have become a laughingstock of the guards now.

"Please, I would prefer less comments and sly smiles. A little respect doesn't hurt," I say and look at Ariadne in an imposing tone.

"Excuse me, my queen," she says and lowers her gaze ashamed. I guess the intimacy got out of hand. It is good to restore the balance again.

"So somehow I and Alexander prevented an impending disaster. This is a positive result," I say thoughtful and I do not lose Alexander's piercing gaze on me. I can't decipher it and I don't want to do it, so i turn my gaze towards the horses.

"How long will it take for Diamante?"

"In five minutes, my queen," says Leonidas seriously.

"Helada remains," I say not wanting to spoil the relationship of trust between us. Diplomacy must always be my ally.

"I will wait in my carriage," I add and head to the place where it is stopped.

The others disperse and settle the last issues of our journey but Alexander follows me. I feel it. He grabs me by the hand just before I step on the first step of the carriage. I turn my gaze and look around.

"Do you want something, Alexander?" I say and pull my hand from his grip. I look at him with as much indifference as I can spare. He looks at me with wonder and then with sadness. He puts his hands behind his back and lowers his head.

"If you need something Helada, I am at your disposal," he says with his voice acquiring the harsh connotation of the guard and warrior he is.

"I'll keep it in mind," I say and turn my back going up the stairs of the carriage.

I close the door behind me and take a deep breath. I lower my body and sit on the floor with my back resting on the closed door. At the door that I myself closed behind me, separating me with him. I rest my head on the wooden surface and close my eyes. There is no emotion between a queen and her guard beyond a relationship of submission. It *shouldn't* exist. I have to focus on the facts, not the emotions. Today I helped, in my own way, to restore balance to nature. It doesn't matter that I don't know the way. It is completely irrelevant that I myself find myself in a storm so intense that it has turned my heart and mind upside down. The carriage finally starts with a destination for a new city. I wonder what does Diamante has in store for me? Will I be able to deal with it? It is enough just to trust my logic and everything will be fine, I think and stand up with my hope my partner.

Chapter 18⚘

A new day dawns and my anxiety grows more and more. From early on we have all gathered in the large dining room with Nymphadora and we are trying to find a solution. We cannot continue to stay in the palace, it is very dangerous for all of us. At the same time, my thoughts travel to the night we spent in the woods. What am I after all? What can I do? I've started to be afraid of myself.

I have noticed the strange looks of the group when I express my opinion. The awkward moves they make. They are trying to move away from me... And if I were in their place, I would do the same. No matter how well Shawn hides it, I feel that deep down he has his doubts about my power and what it can cause. On the other hand there are also the natural disasters in Universo. Our families who are in danger. I don’t want to consider even for a moment that they might have got hurt. I don't even want to discuss the 'Miedo' issue. I can still feel his slimy nails getting into my skin. In this memory I make a grimace of disgust and turn abruptly to the present.

"So we have a deal," says Nymphadora and flies away with her sisters.

"Are we sure of that?" I ask cautiously.

"There is no other solution," Dora says decisively. Daniel turns and looks at her, and as if drawing strength from her bravery he adds:

"Let's do it. We don't have anything to lose anyway."

"There is only the issue of Daroulis," says Sylvia.

"I'll take care of that," Adrian says. His gaze is dark and I can’t see the sparkle he had when we first entered the woods. He has no appetite for jokes or quarrels. That's a good thing. I suppose. He turns around and looks at me seriously. I feel for some reason remorse for something I've done. I can't specify for what though. His gaze remains glued to me. I look at him just as intensely. Do you want to play? So let's play. I don't blink for a moment and he does the same. He crosses his arms and I do the same.

"Is something wrong, my Elli?" he says after a while. Shawn's head turns like a slingshot towards me. Should I say the same thing? *What are you doing Elli? Is it time for games?* Quiet inner voice. I'll do it. I can't lose to an Oscuro.

"Is something wrong, my Adrian?" I say trying to copy his style.

"Well, have they gone crazy?" asks Daniel to Dora in wonder.

"*My*?" asks Shawn, and I feel his anger suffocating me.

"Everything is fine, my love," he says with a smug smile on his lips. How it irritates me! I know I have already lost and I cross my arms like a spoiled child. He bursts into laughter, which annoys me even more.

"Did I miss something?" asks Shawn, and crystals have already formed in his hands. He looks at us alternately with undiminished anger.

"No, my love. Nothing at all," I say and give him a kiss on the cheek. When I turn my gaze towards Adrian, he has turned red with anger. I smile at him with the same smug smile he had before and he abruptly stands up. We are even, then.

"I'm going to pack my things," he says and turns his head right where Sylvia is sitting. "Do you want some help... my love?" he asks smiling, throwing all his charm on her. We are all left with our mouths open. I look at him thoroughly. What is he doing?

"Oh... no," says Sylvia, looking at him at a loss.

"For whatever you need..." he says and takes her hand and kisses it. "I'm here for you." With a playful wink, he turns his back and walks out of the room. For some reason I am incredibly annoyed with his action. Who does he think he is? Sylvia looks at us with wonder but her cheeks have acquired a pink tint. Of course! He put in the big means and took the match at the end, but this silent war is not over yet. With clenched fists I follow the others as they head to their rooms.

"Elli, you are ready to kill a man. Calm down a little bit," says Caroline as she comes next to me.

"What do you mean to calm down? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" I say angrily. Dylan, who is a few steps behind us, speeds up his step and gets into his room. Perfect, now I have his minion watching me.

"Calm down. I know what you're thinking. *Always*," she says and grabs me by the shoulders, forcing me to stop just before I enter my room.

"And you have to forget what you're thinking right now," she says and lowers her hands. "For the good of all three of you," she adds and leaves me alone.

As soon as I close the door behind me, I sit on the floor and rest my head on its wooden surface. I have to get this thought out of my mind. For the good of all. But there is no thought. I stand up. Just the thought of defeating him the next time. *If* there is a next time... after what we're going to do.

We don't have a lot of luggage, only the clothes lent to us by the nymphs and our basic items. We look around as if hypnotized as we set up our tents. In the dark waters of the river the silhouette of each of us is reflected. I look at my own. I've changed since the first day we came into this forest. My hair has lengthened and now it is waving in front of my face. I don't feel the fear I had or the ignorance that possessed me. My facial features have taken on the decisive aspect of a warrior, as my father wanted to see me from a young age. Now I know my enemy and I will discover myself along the way.

We finally set up our tents, bathed in magical golden dust of extinction, for the evening and covered our tracks as best we could in the scarce light of day. Fortunately, no one will be able to see us when we are in these tents. No one except the nymphs of course. Nymphadora, at Adrian's request, gave us a small dose of golden dust to throw at Daroulis when needed. I still can't believe that he convinced her.

"I'm scared," says Dora, who is sitting on Daroulis. I turn my head and look at her. Her eyes reflect the anxiety I feel from the moment we set up the plan. From the moment I closed the door of the queen's room behind me. From the moment we left the palace. I sit on a tree trunk near the fire lit by Sylvia. It is dark and our shadows encircle the dry leaves and the soil around, devouring us.

"We are all afraid, we were not born heroes and neither will we be in one night," I answer her by throwing a little wood into the fire.

"Did Nymphadora tell you more than we already know?" asks Caroline thoughtfully. Shortly before we left the palace, Nymphadora asked to speak to me privately. As our conversation comes to mind, I wish I could forget all that she told me.

"I want to warn you. You have to be very careful because you will only have one chance to do what we've planned. If you won't make it, you will never be able to get out of the forest."

In the group discussion we had before leaving, we spoke openly to the nymphs about the strange enclosure of ours in the forest and our desire to be with our families. We didn't tell them anything about our original mission, which is to prevent the monsters and their leader from leaving the forest, as we decided that it was important to find out what was happening in Universo and how these changes would affect our lives. So Nymphadora offered to help us.

"I know it," I answer her and touch my forehead, taking a deep breath.

"But there is something else..." adds the nymph. I abruptly raise my head anxiously.

"What is it? Tell me."

"There are some things I haven't told you because I'm not allowed to tell you. You have to discover them yourself my Elli. I can't tell you myself what you are strong to do. What you are born to do. I can only tell you this... Search within yourself. Feel your strength. When the time is right you will understand everything."

"How do you know about my strength?" I ask her with wonder.

"I know a lot more than you think. One last piece of advice before you leave. When the fear comes to the surface, make it a shield and defeat it. Feel, listen, act," she tells me and with a kiss on the cheek she leads me to the exit.

"No, she just told me to be careful because we won't have a second chance," I finally reply to Caroline.

"If, I say if, we succeed, then what will we do?" says Sylvia thoughtfully.

"There are a lot of ifs and in every one of them there is a different answer. What I think will happen is that we will all go back to our daily lives and act as if none of this ever happened," says Dylan thinking and his gaze remains on Caroline for a few more seconds.

"As if nothing happened," Adrian repeats, and in his gaze appears the Oscuros I met at that party. His mask has been fallen back into place and I doubt it will bring his relaxed and funny self back to the surface.

"I suggest we don't speculate and we all go to bed early. Tomorrow we have to start rested to find the first ingredient," says Shawn.

"I agree," Daniel replies, and stands up. He extends his hand to Dora's side and helps her get off Daroulis. With one movement he takes her in his arms and does not let her step on the ground. It's as if the two of them have forgotten that we are next to them, as they continue to look each other intensely in the eyes for a long time. I don't want to spoil the moment so I try to focus my gaze on the movement of fireflies.

"Well, Elli, can I talk to you for a sec?" asks Shawn, feeling uncomfortable too.

"Of course," I answer him and he grabs my hand, leading me away from the tents. As I turn my gaze I see another couple. Caroline with Dylan sitting silently side by side. She looks at me with hesitation and I shake my head encouragingly. Either now or never as if I'm telling her. Let's get to know each other a little better now and if everything goes well, we'll see what we do. Just before I turn my head to Shawn, however, I am faced with another scene that unfolds to my right, which makes me lose my breath.

I'm left with my mouth open as I look at the moment when Adrian grabs Sylvia by the waist while kissing her on the neck. It's funny because at that very moment I thought that none of us would go to bed early tonight. *Adrian* certainly won't.

"Elli, are you coming?" I hear Shawn's voice suddenly. All I see is a kiss and Adrian's gaze falling on me. But how can he do that? How can he use Sylvia? Or isn't he using her after all? And for what purpose would he want to use her anyway? His look challenges me to do the same if I dare. Oh Elli, did you have to get into this game? You don't even know the rules!

"*Elli*?" Shawn touches my hand and I flinch at his touch.

"Yes. What did you ask me?" I answer and look at him dizzy.

"Will you come with me?" he replies impatiently, looking at me and then at the scene unfolding in front of us. I turn and look at Adrian again. He kisses Sylvia on her mouth and winks at me. Oh no, it doesn't work like that.

"Yes, I'm coming. Just half a minute. You have something here," I tell him and I raise my hand and touch the right part of his lips. I smile, give him a kiss and grab him by the hand, pulling him away. I don't turn to look behind me as we move away from the tents and the rest of the couples. We reach a small waterfall and sit next to its cool waters.

"So?" I ask him while I look at the waters bursting at our feet.

"What was *that*?" he asks me irritably.

"What was *which* one?" I ask him and look at him in wonder.

"Elli, listen, I've asked you before. Is something going on between you and Adrian? I want you to be honest with me because I don't like games." Unlike me who seems to be a champion. "Especially since I've explained to you what the reason for my previous breakup was."

"Apart from animosity and anger, there is nothing else that unites us," I answer him indifferently.

He doesn't say anything, I don't look at him in the eye but I understand that he is trying to make me say something more with his gaze. There is nothing more. I just want to win over Adrian. I want to banish the complacency from him. I want to erase the ironic smile from his face... I want to know what torments him.

"I won’t insist," he finally tells me and throws a stone into the water with force. "There is nothing erotic between us, I assure you," I tell him and throw a smaller stone into the water in turn.

"Okay," he replies angrily and mechanically creates crystals in his hands. I exhale irritated.

"Look at me," I tell him and he doesn't look at me. "Look at me, Shawn." He turns his head and I see flames set in his eyes. His anger scares me but I don't move away from him. I grab his hand and the crystals recede.

"You know... I've always had a thing for you," I say and look him in the eye. The emotions that appear on his face fluctuate from anger, to confusion, then understanding and finally a sly smile.

"That needs explanation," he tells me and smiles even wider.

"Don't tell me you want an erotic confession?" I laugh out loud.

"I will not be able to sleep at night if I know that I once tortured a beautiful girl. My conscience can't fit it," he says, and I burst into laughter.

"Okay fine. I'm going to try," I answer and try not to blush. He turns his whole body towards me and waits for me to speak. He has opened his eyes like a puppy and is moving his hands now encouragingly pushing me to get started. I hide my face with my hands and take a breather. *Nice, Elli, you started it. Tough shit.*

"Well. I am not very good at words. I prefer actions but I will tell you only one thing. I liked you from the first day I saw you entering the classroom and sat next to me. Yeah since then, although I was very young. I just never found the courage to tell you." I can't go on because the atmosphere around me becomes very uncomfortable. All this time I've been looking at my hands and I am sure that I have blushed. I'm waiting for a huge wave to come and swallow me up. For a stone to open up and hide there. So as no one can see me.

"Me too," he tells me in a low voice. I raise my head and look at him. "I liked you too from that day. I was afraid to approach you, I didn't know if you felt the same way and we were kind of friends. I didn't want to ruin the relationship we had."

He raises his hand and hugs my waist. I lean my head on his shoulder and breathe a sigh of relief. So it was mutual! But why did it take us so long to figure it out? The darkness has now touched even the deepest part of the river, making me instinctively close my eyes exhausted. I wish I could stay in this embrace forever.

"Elli?" he asks me then softly.

"Yes," I answer sleepily.

"Did you know that all stones are different from each other? That there is no one that resembles the other?" he says and picks up a tiny blue stone which he places on my palm. I look at it confused as it shimmers under the light of the fireflies. Its shape

looks like a heart and the color changes from blue to turquoise depending on the angle of view. I raise my eyes and look at him inquisitively. He bursts into laughter and squeezes my cheek playfully.

"Right now you probably think I'm crazy but what I'm telling you makes sense. Look!" he says and picks up a white stone that is next to his feet. "That's me and that's you," he adds and brings his stone next to mine. A laugh escapes me but seeing his serious expression I stop. They are both about the same size, with his having an irregular circular shape.

"What I want to explain to you is that no matter how different we are, it is our choice whether to coexist with the person next to us. We are all unique and no one should make us feel uncomfortable about who we are. That's why I want you to know that I'm not afraid of you, on the contrary I admire you and I would like you to know." My eyes sparkle with the tears that I can hardly hold back. He is not afraid of me. He *admires* me. The realization of the truth suffocates me emotionally and a tear manages to find its way to my cheek. Shawn realizes this and kisses me, stopping his descent. I hug him tightly and put the stone in my bag. He follows my example and puts his own in his pocket. I will always have it with me, to remind me of this moment and the feelings that Shawn's words created in me, I think as I hug him again, unable to move away from him.

"Shawn?" I ask him and I feel his chest stiffen.

"Yes," he replies seriously.

"Do you think we will survive?" I ask him softly.

"What matters is to be together. Whatever the future brings, we will welcome it and try to deal with it. Okay?" he replies and kisses my head.

"Okay," I answer him and close my eyes.

Chapter 19 ♛

The carriage decides to stop and with it my torment too. It is unbelievable how people moved before the wheeled carriages were built. I feel nauseous just thinking about the route we just took. I was in a *vehicle*, but they relied on how strong their two legs were. Unbelievable! Fortunately, as soon as I step on the grass of the city and hear the chirping birds, my stomach returns to its place.

Diamante is a very beautiful city, next to the River Agua and with picturesque alleys that can leave the most skeptical visitor stunned. The houses are built in the foliage of trees and their tiled roofs are painted in a deep red color and are specially made for the avoidance of Erizos, dishonest animals but extremely cute. The city leader approaches to welcome us and a large crowd of people offer me flowers of all kinds.

"Welcome, my queen," says the leader with a deep bow. His face shows that he is happy with our arrival, but his eyes do not testify to the same.

"Thank you. I am glad to be here with you and I wish the bad days to stay in the past," I answer seriously.

"We wish the same too, my queen. My name is Hans Killian and I am the leader of Diamante, for whatever you need I'll be available for the entire time of your stay in our city. But please follow me, I will lead you to the accommodations where you will be staying in, you must be surely very tired." His name rings a bell to me but I can't remember where have I heard it before and the haste he shows cannot be due to his good heart.

"I want to see firstly the destruction left by the hurricane. If possible," I say and look at him thoroughly. Something doesn't stick to him. He may be tall, masculine and have the arrogance that every man with a leadership position possesses, but his beauty is toxic. It makes me feel uncomfortable.

"As you wish. Please follow me," he says and shows us the way.

As we walk through the crowd I observe the people around me. They all bow their heads as we pass by and do not raise their gaze for a moment. Young people, old people, men, women, children stand around us like statues. They don't talk, they don't move. They stand there and wait for us to pass. As I pass by them I lift my gaze and

look instinctively around me. It is then that I understand the cause of their fear. In every corner of the square emerge crystals and swords of diamond. Guards have surrounded everyone and everything.

"Is there any reason your guards have surrounded the whole city?" I ask him, boiling with anger.

Another beast enslaving my people. I had heard stories from my parents about some chiefs of various cities who did not agree with the monarchy and who tried to take power by fraudulent means. The father managed to track them down, but whenever he found someone, someone else took his place. Mr. Hans is obviously one of them.

"For your protection *of course*," he says as if the answer was obvious. But of course! It goes without saying that the cause is me and not his selfishness. So, it's time to change the data.

"I want the Diamante guards to follow me," I say as I make a full turn, looking at each one individually. Like a wave, as soon as my gaze falls on a guard, he casts his gaze towards Hans.

"Do I see disobedience to your queen?" I turn around and look at Hans who is smiling, even though his gaze wants to skin me alive. Let's see who the boss is after all. One by one in a row they come towards us and stand attentively in front of me. Very well.

"Please if any of you have a problem, any problem, let me know, I will be available for you all the time," I say and look the residents in the eyes. Their suffering is evident and their sadness tangible.

"And one more thing. Today none of you will work. Rest and spend the day with your loved ones." In this statement of mine, cheers sounded like a voice, of a prisoner coming out of his cage. My heart breaks. Everyone deserves to be free. Without restrictions from someone who acquired psychological damage from an early age and the only way to feel good about himself is to humiliate others. No! I do not accept that.

"But my queen—" says Hans, ready to explode.

"There is no but. I decide and order. As you have been doing for so many years, it seems," I say and look at him, raising my eyebrow. He joins his lips and clenches his fists without saying anything. I don't want to imagine what the residents have been through over the years. My father had warned me that power can turn you into a monster. I wish Hans was the only confirmation of the rule. But I very much doubt it.

👑

The debris left by the hurricane in its path is evident before we even took two steps. Many houses have been completely destroyed and the streets have turned into earthen giants that as you pass they devour you in one go.

"Where do those people affected by the hurricane live now?" I ask Hans in wonder. As we head deeper into the city, the destruction is unfortunately more. I count over twenty uninhabitable houses.

"We have set up a special area and we are hosting them there until the damage to their homes is repaired," he replies monotonously.

"They need to be given new homes. Not repaired. Do you not see that it is impossible for them to be inhabited again? And what do you mean special area. I want to see it."

"My queen. I know that you care about the future of your people, but I assure you that we have taken the necessary actions for the smooth living of the inhabitants of our city," he replies, without finally answering any of my questions. It is obvious that my presence irritates him. I do not insist any further, but I will find the truth on my own if I have to. As soon as we cross the last destroyed road, Hans leads us to the hotel of the city and with one last bow he disappears from our sight. As we disperse across the floors of the hotel, I let my guards settle in their rooms and invite the four delegates to meet me at the hotel lounge.

"I want us to make an action plan for the days that we will stay in Diamante," I say and look at them. Dark circles have been formed under the eyes of the girls, and the boys' shoulders are bent by long horseback riding. They are definitely exhausted as I am too but we have to hurry if we want to get results.

"I think that we should follow the flow of the river and end up at the waterfalls. From what I heard from the inhabitants, the hurricane came from that direction," says Vrisida.

"I agree! And then we can explore the city. I have never been here before and I would love to get to know the beauties of... What? A little rest even for a day doesn't hurt," Ariadne says as she sees our critical stares. To tell the truth, this thought also crossed my mind but I already have many problems to solve that rest must take a back seat.

"It would be better to focus on our mission. Don’t you think?" says Leonidas, unable to hold back his smile.

"I think it would be wise to help build the houses but also to find out where the residents live. Something in Hans' gaze tells me that things are not under control," says Alexander, and I exhale with relief. This boy knows what's in my mind and expresses it before I can even say it myself.

"So for a good start we follow the river, then we discover Hans’s filthy plans and if we succeed we can take a walk," I say and look meaningfully at Ariadne.

"Sounds like a good plan," says Vrisida.

"Tomorrow morning we start. I will notify the rest of the guards to help rebuild the houses and only the five of us will go to the waterfall. But I don't want anyone to know our destination."

"I agree, Helada," says Leonidas. Although younger than me, he immediately got used to the immediacy that accompanies the address of my name. And I can say I like that.

"Good night, then," I say and wait for everyone to get up.

As soon as all of them go upstairs I wait a few minutes to make sure I hear four doors closing and I get up from the armchair. I don't know if it's a good idea but it's better to be alone. That way I won't get anyone's attention. I take my white cape from my room and go outside. I lower the hood to my eyes and walk crouched. I don't want anyone to recognize me. It would put us all at risk. I have memorized the route since the morning and I know where to turn. Hans made the mistake of guiding me around his city, but he doesn't know that even the most innocent question can lead you to irreparable damage.

👑

I feel the gaze of the passers-by falling on me as I pass by them. But it’s dark and no features of my face are visible. I'm a ghost. A white ghost. As I turn left I stop in front of it. It stands imposing, exactly where I remembered it would be. It is bright as if it has absorbed all the glow of the city. Very tall, compared to the rest. I look around. The road is empty. I'm alone. I momentarily lose my breath as the croak of a raven is heard. But what am I doing? No, Helada you have to do it. For your people. I take a few steps forward, looking around me inquisitively. I try to stay in the shadows lest he appear in front of me. Then what excuse will I make? That I decided to go out for an evening walk? I walk closer. Now I am two steps away.

The moment I take the last step, someone violently pulls my hand, leading me to the nearest shadow. Before I can scream, he closes my mouth. I moan and try to free myself but his grip is too strong. I can't see his face. Helada, calm down. I create a lava ball in my hand, which burns his, at the point where he is holding me. A muffled sound is heard and I immediately free myself. I look around in a hurry and go out into the street again.

"What are we going to do master?" ,a voice is then heard to my right just before I come out into the light. I hide back in the shadows forgetting that, just before a while, my kidnapper was there and I fall with my back straight on him. He does not keep his balance and falls heavily on the asphalt, losing his breath. Well done Helada, you will kill the man! But he deserves it. As soon as he manages to catch his breath, he hugs me and pulls me over him forcing me to change position. So now I'm on the floor and he's on top of me. If he dares to touch even his finger on me, I will hit him so hard that he will not be able to have children in the future. He lowers his head and I am ready with crystals in my hands. Come on, if you dare! As soon as his face gets closer and closer to me, a light from a skylight allows me to see his features at last.

"Be quiet, Helada," he whispers in my ear and I stay with my mouth open. Butterflies fill every aspect of my body. What is *he* doing here? He is still standing above me and fixing himself on his elbows. He looks me intensely in the eyes warning me not to speak. My heart is pounding and I can't hear anything else. I can't hear anything.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him, expressing my thoughts in a low voice and looking over his back. If they discover us, we are doomed.

"Whatever you’re doing too," he replies, and he stands still. He suddenly makes a muffled sound of pain and raises his hand to the light. The spot where the lava touched is burned and his skin is in a very bad condition. I can't look at it. I turn my head to the opposite side and extend my hand to him.

"Let me fix it," I tell him and I feel his hot touch on my fingers. I run my palm over his wound and touched it slightly. He takes a sigh of relief and looks at me again.

"Thank you. Although I deserved it," he says and smiles slyly.

"Why did you pull me? You’re putting us both at risk, don't you understand?" I tell him angrily.

"Did you want to be seen? Sorry I didn't let them. My mistake," he replies and gently strokes his forehead.

"I can face dangerous situations on my own. I can become invisible if I want to, you know," I say and cross my arms in front of my chest.

"Don't mistake me for a fool. You can only disappear when you are in the dark and in front of this house I don't think there is a single unlit crack," he says and raises his eyebrow.

"Still, you are not my bodyguard." He looks around and after making sure there is no one around us, he leans back towards me. But what is he doing? He's trying to kiss me and I'm letting him? I glance at his lips fleetingly before they disappear into my neck.

"And yet, I am," he whispers in my ear before standing up rapidly. I'm stupid—totally stupid. He extends his hand to help me get up. Although my legs do not hold me because of the intimacy between us, as I get up I pull my hand away from his grip. I remove the invisible dust from my cape and look at him critically. I walk past him and look at the figures that have appeared in the corner. The one who spoke before is a short man with two front teeth like a mouse. Despite the unnatural geometry of his body, he wears the official costume of the Lumina garrison and speaks in a low voice with Hans.

"We'll talk about the details in two days, Raton. Come by my office at the same time. I have some things to sort out first," Hans says now.

"Okay master," says the mouse and disappears into the shadows of the street. I exhale irritated. As soon as I perceive Alexander's head above me observing the conversation as well, my anger becomes unbearable. As Hans closes the door of his house I pull Alexander from the collar back into the shadows.

"Now what did you accomplish? We haven't learned anything at all," I say and tap the index finger of my hand on his chest as I pronounce each word.

"You could have avoided this if you invited me to come with you," he says and runs his hands, upset, through his hair.

"Helada listen, I'm on your side. I want you to trust me and count me as an ally. Okay?" he says and grabs me by the shoulders. As if he pressed a lever all the pressure I felt on this very part of my body disappears as if by magic. I raise my head and look at him and just like that my anger turns into relief. I decided to carry all the weight on my shoulders and did not think that with a little help the load would not be so unbearable.

"Okay," I answer and he abruptly pulls his hands away from me, putting them in his pockets. His movement sends a wave of joy and shame towards me at the same time. The good old relationship between guard and queen has resurfaced.

"Fine, so I assume that in two days..." he says impatiently

"Yes, the 'Captivity of the Weasel' mission is being put into practice," I answer happily.

"Should I assume the weasel is Hans?" he asks and bursts into laughter.

"Who else?" I answer with a laugh, and we take the road back to the hotel together. Let's see, Hans Killian— what are you hiding, after all?

Chapter 20⚘

The forest is so dense that it hides the entire sky. Pines and firs embrace everything around us and isolate dangers and every possible form of life. *Human* form to be honest. Cicadas, birds, bees, ants, snakes, lizards, spiders and many other animals of the forest make their presence at regular intervals. The landscape may compensate me, but the fact that at any moment there is the possibility of being bitten by a poisonous snake or some rare insect makes me twist my head like an owl at every sound I hear. With diamond swords we clean the road from the foliage and proceed based on the coordinates given to us by Nymphadora. North of the Boske Forest and west of Rubina. The exact location is shown to us by a compass of gold dust held by Sylvia, which flashes brightly every time we turn the wrong way, while if we head correctly it loses its color and flickers. Sylvia knows best what life is like in the forest, so we trusted her to lead us to our destination. Which is? Unknown. We only know *what to do* once we get there. Not *what we will encounter* along the way.

The journey is unbearably tiring. Despite the shade of the trees, the sun penetrates the foliage and raises the temperature around us. The heat makes our steps slow and the only consolation is the icy waters of the river. In an instant I make up my mind, leave my sack on the ground and enter the water with one movement. I'd rather be wet from head to toe than suffer from the heat. Laughter can be heard behind me as I come to the surface of the water. I'm not seemingly the only one who prefers it, as I see one by one the rest of them following my example. My clothes are soaked and stick to my body, but the coolness that this dive gives me is more than worth it. Shawn comes next to me and hugs me tightly, lifts me up and throws me back into the water. I stay for a little longer at the bottom admiring his abs, which are visible through the thin shirt he is wearing. *Elli put yourself together*. After a while Shawn, upset that I'm slow to rise to the surface takes a dive in search of me. As soon as he spots me, he grabs me by the hand and together we swim towards the surface. The team's laughter becomes sharp as we gasp in our quest to swim.

"Elli, I didn't know that you are a rebellious spirit. It's usually my job to be," Caroline says, laughing sharply.

"When I'm melting from the heat I can do anything for a moment of coolness," I answer.

"It was indeed a very good idea," Dora replies happily.

We swim smiling as if someone gave us the sky with the stars. The truth is that it is not far from what I feel. Water has always been my favorite element. From a young age I loved to swim for hours on the bank of the River Agua next to our house. I put on the sea mask and chased the fish that passed by in front of me or I looked with admiration at the bottom and tried to discover its secrets. Where there is water, there is also the sky. Yet another miracle of nature. The blue of the sky was united with the blue waters of the bank and the result was enchanting. Water and sky. The beginning and end of Universo. That's when I remember: *The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness.* Is the sentence metaphorical after all?

"But I think we have to get out. You never know what might be in a river. Piranias is a possibility and I don't want to deal with it," says Daniel and everyone agrees at once. The beginning may be the sky and the end the sea. If you continue to seek your boldness. Where the two elements come together there is something that I have to deal with boldly. But what? Having been absorbed by my thoughts, I do not realize that everyone has already come out of the water and is waiting for me.

"Elli? Do you want us to bring you a life jacket to camp in the river tonight?" says Adrian with a laugh.

"What? Ah." The beginning and the end. That's it for sure. But where specifically?

"Elli, are you okay?" asks Caroline worriedly.

"Yes, fine," I say and get out of the water. "Let's move on." Caroline understands that something is bothering me but she lets me process it in my mind and I'm sure she'll drive me crazy with questions very soon. I don't know how bad my hair may look or how many things my wet clothes hide or how much I look like a wet cat in general, but all I care about is finding this place. To find the place where the sky joins the water and the beginning becomes one with the end.

As soon as the first stars appear in the sky, we camp on a dark side of the forest, patrolling in shifts. The tent I share with Caroline isn't that convenient, but I prefer this instead of the hard worm-filled soil. We have opened a small lantern and we are

trying with the scant light to deal with something other than our fear of tomorrow. I personally enjoy reading a fantasy book and Caroline draws something in her notebook. It's Adrian's turn to patrol and he whistles carefree every time he passes in front of our tent. That is, every ten minutes. Irritated, I close my book and lift my eyes to the ceiling of the tent tired of his distraction.

"Why does he have to be *so* irritating?" I ask myself.

"To make you like it *even* more," says Caroline without raising her head.

"I don't understand what you mean," I say and look at her puzzled.

"I won't tell you what you feel and for whom Elli, but you should know that in the end you will choose only one," she replies and looks at me slyly.

"Yes. Tell me, little one, what happened between Dylan and you a few days ago?" I say, changing the topic of discussion. It is neither the time nor the place to unravel my feelings. *Yet*. But at some point I know I have to.

"Nothing happened. We just talked," she says and shrugs her shoulders trying to hide her smile.

"You just talked, huh?" I ask her and start tickling her.

"Okay, stop," she says with a laugh. "He confessed to me that he likes poetry and hasn't told Adrian so as not to make him everyone's laughing stock. And I encouraged him to continue since he likes what he does. In general we talked about our interests. That's it."

"That's it? I want details what else did I miss?" I tell her and I nudge her playfully.

"You missed nothing. I just discovered that there is not only the shy side of him but also the creative one, which matches my own artistic side... And I like that," she says and continues to paint.

"And? Did you see any of his works?" I ask her with anticipation.

"I didn't ask him to. It's something very personal. I didn't want to."

"You didn’t want to? Or were you ashamed to ask?"

"Maybe the latter. After all, weren't you the one who urged me to forget about romances? That he is an Oscuros? What has changed now?" she asks me in wonder.

"Uncertainty and fear. Those things have changed. We are preparing ourselves for something big and important. So let's live what we can now because we better regret something we did than something we didn't do," I say and stand up.

"Where are you going?" she asks me.

"Physical needs are *also* something we have to listen to and respect," I tell her and we burst into laughter. I put on my swimsuit and get out of the tent. Adrian thankfully has turned his back to me and doesn't notice me as I head towards the river. I quickly enter its icy waters and... I follow nature's command, anyway.

Just as I'm about to go out, I see a black figure on the other side of the river. My blood freezes and I become one with the waters. I stay still. I can't make out who's standing there looking at me but I feel the fear filling every inch of my body. He takes a step forward and I take a step back. In which direction should I go? He is located on the side of the camp. Should I follow the flow of water? But what if there is a waterfall next and its rushing waters crush me on the rocks? He takes another step and in seconds he is at the beginning of the bank. But how did he do that? In the moonlight I see a hood. No. Not again. I create two diamond swords and wait for his next move. Come on. I'm ready. He raises his hand and his crooked fingernail aims at me. Yes, it's me, Elli.

"What do you want? COME ON," I shout and he remains unperturbed. He lowers his hand and bursts into laughter. Did my tiny voice sound so funny?

"It's not the time yet," he says, and I hear his voice in my head.

"ELLI?" Adrian's voice is heard from afar. Miedo raises his hands and with one movement disappears from my sight into a cloud of fog. Just as Adrian's auburn head emerges from the forest.

"Elli, are you okay?" he asks, taking off his shirt and diving into the water. He reaches me and lifts my face in his hands. I tremble from the shock but also from the cold water of the river. I can't speak. He takes me in his arms and pulls me out of the

water. He leaves me on the ground above his shirt and removes the hair from my face. "Talk to me."

"I'm fine," I tell him, and I see his blue-green eyes. His *restless* blue-green eyes. They are so bright under the moon. I look at his tousled hair, his face, his body. I'm resting my hands on his body right now. And what a fine body this is! I shake my head as if I'm dizzy and lower my hands. He stands above me and does not move.

"Are you sure you're okay? Why did you shout before?" he says worried and searches my body for some wound or trauma.

"I thought I saw a Piranias but it was a frog after all," I say and smile fakely. He doesn't seem to believe me but he relaxes his shoulders as soon as he understands that I don't have any physical harm.

"Ehm. I can get up, now I feel better," I tell him and he looks at me intensely. Instead of an answer I get a crooked smile. It seems as if he is thinking about what he will answer me. As if I asked him something.

"I don't think so," he says, bowing his head abruptly towards me. Before I can answer, his lips touch my neck and paralyze my body for real this time.

"You smell so nice," he says and remains stuck on my neck. His voice sounds like he is drunk and makes me lose my breath. I try to catch my breath. His own scent has captured all my senses. I close my eyes and dream that I find myself lying on the lawn of a cottage and I hear the waves of the sea crashing a few meters away from me. I wonder how my scent would be like. I open my eyes abruptly. In a moment of insanity, I violently push Adrian's heavy body away from me and stand up abruptly.

"What happened?" he asks me in a daze. As if he has not understood the seriousness of the situation. As if he has not understood that all this that just happened should not have happened. What happened? Ha. *Unbelievable*. I exhale in indignation.

"You know what? I won't even answer," I say and head to the camp.

"No, Elli wait…" he says desperately. Something in his voice, in the way he pronounces my name makes me stop. I don't turn to look at him. I can't. "Look... I'm sorry ok? I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable," he says, and I feel sadness in his voice. I don't know what should I answer. That *maybe* I didn't feel so uncomfortable? That maybe... no. *Elli stop thinking*.

"Good night, Adrian," I say and continue my way to the tents.

"You look so much like her, damn it," he says in a low voice that I barely manage to hear. I then turn around and look at him. He has raised his head and is now staring at the stars. Then his face deformes and so suddenly he starts to throw stones into the river with force. Like that night at the palace. I don't know if I should approach him. My instinct tells me that it is better to leave him alone but my heart tells me to comfort him. And like any idiot, I followed my heart eventually. With slow steps I reach him and touch his arm while his muscles have contracted and he is ready to throw another stone into the water.

"Calm down," I tell him, he turns his head and one by one the muscles of his face and body calm down. He leaves the stone on the ground and sits sadly on a rock. I sit next to him. Usually I wait for the other person to start speaking first but in this case my curiosity overcomes me.

"To whom do I look so much like?" I ask him and look at him in wonder. He doesn't answer me. He persistently looks at a certain point of the bank. He isn't moving at all. I don't want to force him to tell me but I want to know.

"*Adrian*?" I ask him and look at him impatiently. He takes a breath and says something I didn't expect him to say.

"To my sister."

"To your sister?" I ask him and move away from him a little.

"Yes."

Awesome! Should I take this as a compliment or not? Well done, Elli. Well done. You're something of a sister to Adrian. And you thought that maybe he would like you. It sounds like a joke now that I think about it truthfully. Ha. Wonderful! He turns around and looks at me with bright eyes. Is he crying? Who? Adrian. I look at him

like a pillar of salt and wait for him to speak. My mind is really empty. I don't know what to do. Has the selfish Oscuros suddenly become sensitive? But I can't understand why.

"And why do you have outbursts of anger when you think about her?" I ask him as soon as I make the connection in my mind. He doesn't answer me. Talk to me, damn you. He turns his body towards me. He has focused all his attention on me now. A tear falls on his cheek and I instinctively chase it away with my finger. He tilts his head to the side of my hand and kisses the same finger. Why isn’t he talking? His face is getting closer to me. What is he doing? And in a gust of wind he joins his lips with mine. The kiss has passion and intensity. It's not hasty. It's as if one is quenching their thirst through the other. It's desperate.

As soon as I manage to catch my breath I say his name with the intention of stopping him but as if he is triggered by something inside of him, he kisses me with more intensity. I run my hands through his hair and he hugs my waist so tightly that I think I'm shrinking in his arms. No... yes. Stop... Continue. Elli you shouldn't... yes you should. Well, there is only one way. I move away from his hot grip and before he can open his eyes I get up and start running towards the camp. It only has to be done in this way, I say to myself and run without looking behind me. Without seeing Adrian's faint, crooked smile piercing my back. Without thinking about what has just happened. Without realizing that I am smiling broadly as if all my wishes just came true.

Chapter 21

With such heat I wonder how I haven't fainted yet. We pass through tall trees whose shade somewhat improves the situation but again my every step is torturous. We decided not to go to the waterfalls in the carriage so as not to attract the attention of the residents and Hans'. So here I am now, melting from the heat and not being able to do *anything* about it. Where is the winter, the cold, the snow? And what I wouldn't give now for a snowball fight.

"Do we still have a long way to go?" I ask desperately.

"The townspeople told me that as soon as we see an alley that passes over the stream, it means that the waterfalls will appear on the next slope," Vrisida shouts before disappearing behind a rock. I stop to take a breath and at the same time Ariadne and Leonidas pass by me casually discussing self-defense techniques. They seem to be having a lot of fun because they don't even turn to look at me as they follow the path of Vrisida. A flask with water then appears next to me and I take it with longing. I drink all its contents and return it to its owner.

"Thank you!" I say to Alexander and I take a breath just before I start my path to where the rest of them went.

"You're welcome," he says, and he takes off his shirt in one go. I stay with my mouth open. Metaphorically, of course. The muscles of his body move with his every movement. *Logical*, since they are muscles after all. I cough and take my gaze away from his abs.

"Shall we move on?" I ask, and not waiting for an answer, I start to leave.

"I would say that a dive wouldn't be bad," he says and as soon as I turn to look at him, he winks at me.

"Nah. I don't think so. Besides, I haven't brought my swimsuit with me," I answer.

"Who said anything about swimsuits?" he says slyly.

I look at him in shock. I roll my eyes and think about his proposal. He can't mean... He looks behind me and I follow his gaze, but before I can turn my head, with one movement he passes his hands under my legs and I let out an exclamation of surprise.

I get scared at the sudden loss of gravity and stick my body on his. I touch his abs. Oh Universo!

"Alexander. What are you doing?" I ask him, still in shock, looking at the ground. He approaches his face near mine and smiles before speaking.

"I love it when you call my name," he says and in one go throws me into the water. The sudden change in temperature rejuvenates me, I already feel better. Because of the water of course, nothing else. As I rise to the surface of the water I feel a big wave coming at me and hands grabbing me by the waist.

"How do you feel now?" he asks me as he holds me by the waist and I feel his breath on my neck. How do I feel? That's a trap question. Certainly. Before I can answer something completely unrelated to what I feel, his hands move abruptly away from me as if an electric current has penetrated them.

"What are you doing there? Are you having fun on your own?" Leonidas' voice is suddenly heard from our left. I take a dip and reach the bottom of the river. I can't hide my shame. Helada, you have to concentrate. You are the queen. You should not hide, let alone from your guards. During my inner struggle, three more figures appear in the water. I wonder what Alexander answered. I rise to the surface when my breath doesn't hold me anymore and I look around. Everyone is busy pouring water at each other, so the moment of my absence becomes insignificant. Nice. At least no one understood anything. To understand what? That... nope. Nothing happened anyway.

"Are you all right?" I hear his voice very close to me.

"Yes, fine," I say and I don't turn to look at him. I'm sure my white skin has turned red and I don't want to risk him figuring it out.

"Well, everyone out of the water. The break is over," I shout at the rest as I quickly move away from Alexander's hot gaze.

My proposal is followed by repeated exclamations of protest and disappointment from the group, which I would share in their place. But I'm not in their position so I shouldn't get carried away. I get out of the water and look at my wet clothes sticking onto my body. Wonderfully, I will have to stay in this state until they dry out. The queen of Universo who looks like a wet cat. I take my things from the ground and

move on to the side indicated by Vrisida earlier, without waiting for the others to follow me. Enough shame have I suffered for a day, so it is better to stand tall and avoid intimacies. I'm the queen, damn me!

I create diamond swords to make it easier for me on my way and I pass through the foliage. I hear footsteps behind me and I guess they're the others so I proceed unabated until I meet the alley. It's gorgeous. Wooden steps create a natural small bridge that passes just above the stream. Around fish are chasing each other and the squirrels have set up a dance on the trunks of the trees. I take a deep breath and hold in me the smell of the trees. They say that nature is refreshing. Now I understand why.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" a voice is heard behind me. I turn abruptly and do not see Alexander, nor do I see Vrisida, Ariadne or Leonidas as I expected. I see a... A monster.

I try to understand the picture I see in front of me. A black-clad figure. His large yellow eyes are the only visible element of his face. Hooked nails protrude from the sleeves with the gray skin of his fingers consisting only of wrinkles.

"Who are you?" I ask him terrified.

"Tsk tsk. That’s a very cliché question, don't you think?" he says and laughs. His evil laughter brings me back to reality and I immediately form crystals in my hands.

"I'm also waiting for a cliché answer, then. Like, I'm your lost uncle or a shadow of yourself or, I don't know, a scary guy who wants to kill you."

"I'm your nightmare," he says and growls. "What do you think of that?"

"A vague answer. Why doesn't anyone answer the questions directly anyway?" I say and raise my hands in indignation. "Which one is gorgeous?" I ask him, recalling the first sentence he uttered.

"But nature of course!" he says and raises his hands pointing to the natural wealth around us. My mind cannot process my actions. I have caught conversation with a monster as a reaction to the insanity of the whole situation.

"What do you want?" I ask him cautiously and take a step back. He laughs out loud and suddenly stops, fixing his bright eyes on me.

"To swallow your fear. To live by your blood. To take your strength," he says and takes a step forward. I scream for help and in response I get sounds of foliage that move violently from their roots. The monster raises his hands and in one motion a cloud of smoke swallows him and disappears from my sight.

"HELADA?" the voice of Alexander is heard from afar.

"Here," I say with the little voice I have left. I see four figures approaching me but it's like I don't see them. To live by your blood? I'm pale, but I know I have to hide from the others what happened. I may be hallucinating and there may be no monster. I may have had sunstroke. Yes, that's it.

"What happened?" asks Ariadne, worried as soon as she arrives next to me. "Helada, are you okay?" she asks me again as I don't answer.

"What? Yes, fine. Just a lizard walked on my leg and I got scared. That's all. Let's move on." No one questions my lie even though I understand that no one believed it. We walk carefully over the wooden steps and after a few minutes we pass the big rock. Let me forget the incident that just happened. I definitely imagined it all. I lift my gaze dizzy from the sun and what I see is amazing. Nature never ceases to amaze us. Hidden behind the rocks now dominates a magnificent waterfall. Its waters are crystal clear and their color changes depending on the position of the sun. Nymphs dance around it and frogs on water lilies enjoy the coolness of the water. Pelican rosados have flooded the sky and suddenly turned it from blue to pink.

"Here was the origin of the hurricane. Now what do we do?" asks Vrisida after a while.

"We're looking for anything out of the ordinary. Surely these hurricanes come from the absence of stones so they are magical in a way," I say and I raise my shoulders. That's how I want to believe.

"Let's get started," says Leonidas excitedly and takes Ariadne by the waist. She looks back towards the others and shyly moves away from his grip. I was well aware of that. I look at the ground kicking indifferent pebbles and trying not to look at them until

they are far away. I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable. Although I don't find the reason they should feel that way. They may have an age difference, but this should not prevent them from being together. If there is mutual understanding, common interests and trust, everything can be achieved.

I stay behind with Vrisida and Alexander trying to find some clue near the waterfall but in vain. We each move away in a certain direction and continue the investigation. Suddenly I spot behind the waterfall a climbing plant with four colors. White, black, red and gray. Its joined leaves form a U in the center. Universo, that is, all four colors of the breeds. I pass through the leaves and face the garden in the Enchanted Forest. But how is it possible? The only gate that can take me here is in the palace. I look around in amazement. I take a few steps and close my eyes. This place has always made me feel at peace. It's my personal paradise.

"But how did we get here?" asks Vrisida and makes me jump. I open my eyes and look at the fountain to my right, the bank straight in front of me and the flora and fauna of my house.

"I honestly don't know. There was no other gate to the Enchanted Forest. It must have been created as soon as the stones were lost," I say, and I look at Vrisida.

"Be careful," Alexander's voice call out at the entrance. Terrified, I turn to look at him, but he sprints between us and pulls out his diamond swords. The light suddenly turns into darkness. The sky is filled with clouds. I feel a shiver piercing me as I see the beast in front of me. It is gigantic and abysmal. He devours everything in his path. Flowers, birds, rocks and ultimately us. Alexander believes that with his body he can protect us but it is a futile effort. The hurricane knows that it is omnipotent and shows it in practice.

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The air is so suffocating that I can't breathe. My body is constantly hitting objects, and my voice sounds hoarse in my mouth. I try to distinguish two bodies in the chaos. Only two. I want them to be safe. I've never felt so helpless before. I can't do anything to get away with it. The hurricane is abysmal. Around me a gray fog hides all the magic of the forest. I'm in another world. A world dominated by a perpetual hum and an uprooted life. Trees, fruits, branches, birds, wildcats, doors, windows, dishes,

clothes, toys, money. A person's whole life is currently passing in front of me. But how insignificant it is without company!

I shout the names of the others but I don't get an answer. My heart beats faster. I take a sharp breath and turn my body to the right just before a huge table hits me. How did all this get here? Suddenly a laughter sounds at first like a whisper. I take courage in believing that it is Vrisida or Alexander. But as the sound gets louder, the laughter becomes more evil. I look around me and as I move the hair from my eyes nails penetrate the skin of my wrists.

I scream as I see the monster approaching his face on me. Two fangs emerge from his mouth, but I'm frozen. My end has come. I close my eyes and wait for it to come. A thud and voices of struggle are heard. I open my eyes and see the figure wrestling fiercely with Alexander. They both hover in the air but the monster reacts to the power of the wind as if he is in his natural habitat. He shakes his hands masterfully, attracting murderous objects towards him which he launches at Alexander. He, in turn, repels them furiously with the help of his swords and with an indescribable anger throws himself at the monster. I hear a sound of pain behind me and turn my head abruptly. Vrisida has embraced a tree trunk and is trembling. I shake my body and try with the resistance of the air to get to her side. I step on the solid objects that the tornado brings and finally grab the trunk.

"Are you okay?" I shout at her. She does not answer me but continues to look with horror at the battle that is taking place in front of her. The monster violently grasps Alexander's shoulders and throws him onto a huge rock. I feel his pain even if I am not the one who was beaten. I carefully approach Vrisida and touch her back. She makes a grimace of pain and looks at me pleadingly. I lift her blouse and fold my hands in terror. Her back is full of whip scratches.

"Who did this to you?" I ask her but I don't get an answer. She could cure it but she is in a state of shock. I lightly run my hand over her wounds. I can't understand. Why is it not working? I shake my head, unable to believe it. I'm trying again. I wave my hands like a witch who has lost her sanity. Unable to cure her, I slowly lower her blouse and gather her bloody hair in a bun.

"Can you talk to me?" I ask her softly. She raises her hand and points to the monster. I lift my gaze and see Alexander with blood running from his forehead, unconscious in

the hands of the monster. No, you're not going to even touch his hair. The monster approaches his face towards Alexander.

"NOOOO," I shout as I unleash my power on him. Lava, diamonds, rage, indignation. Whatever my soul hides. A white glow fills everything and the light becomes so dazzling that I close my eyes. I feel my powers abandon me but I don't stop until I'm sure in my heart that the nightmare has stopped. That Alexander is still alive.

Chapter 22⚘

"Elli, you're not serious," says Caroline as we walk.

"Yes, I am," I answer her in a whisper, unable to hide my smile. The rest of the group is a few steps ahead of us as we move through the forest. Last night I returned to our tent out of breath and begged Caroline not to ask me questions. I lay down and turned my back towards her. I knew I was wrong and she would point it out to me as soon as I told her what happened but I wanted to keep even a little bit of the feeling that Adrian's touch caused me. I felt as if someone gifted me the largest library in the world. But at the same time I felt remorse for what I did. I should have reacted earlier. I had to *slap* him. I had to *curse* him.

"I told you! You had to listen to me," Caroline says critically.

"Okay, do you think I had planned it? It happened. I was confused." I answer her and look away.

"*Confused*. Yes. I hope it doesn't happen again because you know what that will mean."

"Yes Caroline. I know very well," I answer her by rolling my eyes.

Sometimes she speaks as if she is my older sister. Since I mentioned the sister issue, I am reminded of the phrase that Adrian said before he kissed me. Do I look like his sister? Why did he kiss me then? Is he a psychopath or did he want to avoid answering the question I asked him? Why is he aggressive and his mood is constantly changing? I can't know, but I shouldn't be interested either. I have accepted my mistake. I know that this kiss will not be repeated and I feel the disappointment overwhelming me. But no! I won't play his games. I'm with Shawn and I'm happy with him. Adrian drives me crazy whenever I see him, and I don't like that side of myself at all.

"Did you see Miedo then?" she suddenly asks me with concern.

"Yes," I answer and shudder at his memory. I didn't tell anyone else. I didn't want to disorient them from our mission. We already have a lot to think about.

"It’s not the time yet for *what*?" she asks me, repeating his words.

"I don't know but I didn't like his tone at all. I am sure that he will appear in front of us very soon. We have to be prepared."

"Sssh," says Sylvia, leaning behind the thick leaves of a beech tree.

We approach and she waves at us to bend down. As I raise my head slightly, I see a huge cave with its entrance in the shape of a lion. So, we've arrived. But our first obstacle is a few meters away from us. Two Bestias have blocked the entrance, preventing any intruder who will attempt to enter the cave to steal what we need, as Nymphadora pointed out to us. It's hard to get in, it's easy to get out. We need to distract them in some way. Someone touches my elbow. I turn around and see Adrian looking me in the eyes, motioning to follow him. This is the first time we are so close since yesterday's events. I don't know if I should follow him but something in his countenance hardens and he shakes his hand showing me something. I get up and reach him.

"Do you see there? On the right side? There is a crack in the rocks. This will be our entrance."

"But it’s right next to the Bestias." He smiles smugly and rolls up his sleeves.

"It's time to send in the big guns," he says and whistles twice. I turn my head and two huge wings create a wave of air, soil and leaves. Daroulis appears in front of us making the loudest lion sound I have heard in my life.

The reaction of the Bestias is immediate. The sound of their heavy hooves on the stones send vibrations to the floor, creating an intense earthquake. I look terrified over the foliage as the monsters approach our hiding place. I turn my head and look at Adrian with indescribable anger. He smiles at me as if we have already won the battle.

"Are you insane?" I ask him and I feel my nerves tense. "We wanted a distraction. Not a frontal attack. This is not the time to play the wild Oscuro." I say and put my hands on my hips.

I don't know what his intention is but I didn't like at all that we didn't decide as a team on our next move. I understand the moment when my words are assimilated into his mind.

"Is *this* what you think that I'm doing?" he says, and I see in his eyes the same anger as mine.

"So that's what I'm going to do," he replies and stands up. He whistles once and Daroulis bows his head, in the shape of a raven. Adrian grabs his coat and climbs onto his teddy bear back.

"Where are you going?" I yell at him just before he takes off. I place my hands on Daroulis' soft coat, trying to stop him.

"To do what you told me," he says, and in two movements Daroulis' huge wings push him away from the ground.

"Adrian wait..." I shout but he doesn't turn to look at me.

"But what is he doing?" asks Sylvia as she comes next to me.

"I don't know," I answer indignantly as the group gathers around me and looks at the sky in wonder.

With two movements Adrian furiously grabs two tree branches and breaks them in half. The Bestias approach him, roaring angrily. As soon as he reaches their height and before they can react, Daroulis flies between them with Adrian extending his arms, hitting his improvised clubs with force on the monsters' chests. The blow did not change the course of the monsters in the slightest, who are now returning more determined towards Adrian. He turns back again and stands opposite them, waiting for them to approach him. As soon as the Bestias arrive in front of him, they stretch out their huge arms, intending to crush him, but he turns his head towards us and winks. Is he stupid? They will kill him! Their claws pierce Adrian's shirt but before they can capture him, Adrian whistles sharply once and Daroulis turns upside down.

So now Adrian, keeping balance with his legs and hovering with his head turned to the ground, stretches out his arms and tears with the branches the cobwebs from the stomach of the Bestias. The screaming creatures then are cut in two and scattered to the ground. Daroulis lands and Adrian now comes down triumphantly from his back,

and all I want to do is scream. Because of my nerves that he didn't listen to me? Because of relief that he is safe? I don't know. But Sylvia, who has fallen in his arms, definitely knows better.

"You could have been killed," she tells him as she walks away from his arms, visibly upset.

"I wasn't killed though. I'm fine," he replies and smiles sweetly at her. He has never looked at me like that. *Gather yourself Elli.*

"Good, now that we're all fine, can you explain to me what all this was for?" I tell him angrily. I still don't understand why he wanted to put us in danger. His gaze darkens and he looks me in the eyes.

"Daroulis was our distraction. He would drive the Bestias away from the crack and we would enter without being noticed. Then he would fly behind us and we would block the small entrance with stones before they could see us. But... " he replies, and the disappointment is engraved on his face. I judged him before he could explain to me. I judged him because I wanted to forget our kiss. His gaze doesn't meet mine as he says, "Shall we go?" before extending his hand towards Sylvia. She links her palm with his and they head towards the entrance of the cave. Shawn approaches me and makes the same gesture. Taking my gaze off Adrian's hand, I look up at Shawn. I smile sadly and link my hand with his. We say nothing more as we enter the cave, immediately swallowed up by the black darkness.

The moment we enter the cave what happened between me and Adrian is erased from my memory. This is not the time to think yet. To think about *him*. I squeeze Shawn's hand and he turns and kisses my head tenderly. We will succeed. All that can be heard is our steps on the wet stone. Sylvia provides us with the light through her lava ball and we move hesitantly towards the interior of the cave. In these moments of darkness I wonder where Brillar might be. Why hasn't she appeared in front of me yet? To guide me, to advise me on the next move I need to make, to tell me why she chose me.

"The path narrows in front of us," Dylan says as he has moved on and checks our safe passage.

"Watch your head," I say to Caroline and Daniel who are behind me. Caroline nods and looks at me seriously. Her determination sometimes scares me. She is the complete opposite of me. I may spend days thinking about whether I should do everything. She, on the other hand, decides it in an instant.

I take a quick step forward without thinking about it and feel the ground moving under my foot. As soon as I lower my gaze, I immediately understand what is going to happen. I let go of Shawn's hand and in one motion I call my strengths.

"BE CAREFUL." I shout at them as I create a sphere around our bodies. The rest of the group turn around and look at me in astonishment but do not understand my concern.

"Elli? What happened to you?" Shawn asks worriedly. I look around me and nothing happens. Adrian laughs suddenly.

"You’re acting as if you stepped on a landmine," he says, turning his back on me. With the sticks that exterminated the monsters previously he is now trying to break my sphere of protection. With force he hits the branches on it and when this does not work he tries with his fists. I don't look at him. I don't care what he thinks. I'm trying to listen. To feel the air as it changes. He turns around after a while angry and says:

"What do you think? You'll let us go—" Before he can finish his sentence, a jet of water erects from all sides of the cave. Holes open and sea water along with Piranias fill the space around us.

"Dios mío!" says Dora and hugs Daroulis terrified. Adrian looks at me angrily as if I caused all this. Basically yes, I caused it but by mistake.

"And now what do we do?" Sylvia asks. The water has already filled the whole area around us. If for some reason I cannot keep the sphere intact either we will drown or be eaten by the Piranias.

"I suggest we move to the end of the trail. There’s definitely going to be a tunnel where the water can be removed," says Shawn.

"What if there isn’t?" asks Adrian and crosses his arms over his chest.

"We will move on and we will find out. I really don't know how much longer I'll be able to hold the sphere," I say with my teeth clenched. Caroline rests her hand on my

shoulder and smiles encouragingly. Everyone then accelerates their step by moving to the bottom of the cave. As we reach the point where the path narrows, Dylan stops abruptly.

"We are trapped," he says anxiously and we all come next to him. I look at the cliff that extends in front of us. Nymphadora had warned us that it would not be easy but she had not determined how difficult it would be. I take a terrified look to my left and Shawn reciprocates my gaze. The water has barely receded as it is swallowed up by the black darkness of the abyss but continues to gush from the notches of the wall.

"What are we going to do now?" says Dora, who is on top of Daroulis. The level of the water has started to rise and soon it will fill all the space around us. I lift my gaze and look around me. Brown rocks fill my field of vision and *water*. Lots of water. It can't be, there must be a way out somewhere. Daniel looks terrified as the water rises and fills the entire expanse of the cliff in front of us. Soon there will be no place that is not covered by water and Piranias. Such annoying animals, they open and close their huge mouths as they pass swimming in front of us waiting for the opportunity to devour us.

"Oh no, no," I say as I feel my hands trembling. A cramp in my hands makes my knees bend and I fall to the hard floor.

"Elli?" says Shawn terrified as he bends down next to me and pushes the hair aside from my sweaty face. The sphere shrinks but does not subside. I haven't kept my strength for so long before and I feel tiredness piercing my body.

"I have to think about something and fast," murmurs Shawn while his hand make circles on my back. Suddenly he stands up and extends his arms in front of him, creating crystals along their entire length.

"Show off," says Adrian through his teeth. But Shawn doesn't answer him as he looks around with determination. His gaze is fixed at a point in front of us and he points with the pointed face of his diamond sword.

"There," says Shawn, and we all look at the place he points to us. I feel so exhausted. I don't know if I can make it.

"Are you sure? How do we get there? It's too far away," Daniel says. Shawn turns his head and looks at me anxiously. My face reflects the pain I feel and his eyes acquire an incomparable sadness. He approaches me, falls on his knees and takes my face into his hands.

"Elli... I want you to know that you are the only one for me. I dreamed of finding someone who understands me from a young age. And I'm lucky that you were this girl. I'm sorry I was so late," he says, and the anguish is reflected in my face. What does he mean? His words are as if he wants to... He kisses me tenderly on the lips and stands up. He looks at me one last time with sadness and turns his back towards me. As if he wants to say goodbye to me.

"Shawn? No, don't do it," I say and I try to stand up. Tears gather in my eyes and blur my vision.

"Please don't—" He takes a deep breath and with one movement he hits a part of my sphere which cracks. With a second attempt he opens a void that allows him to free himself from the protection I gave him, from my embrace, from my love. Water begins to enter the sphere but I immediately close the gap with the strength I have left, watching in fear as Shawn's body is covered in seconds by layers of pointed teeth. Feeling anger and indignation, I stand up and bang my hands crying on the sphere that separates me from him. Feeling like a prisoner who can do nothing but see her beloved one being devoured in front of her eyes.

Chapter 23

I hear a scream. A *woman's* cry. I can't open my eyes though. They are swollen from the tears that have now dried up. I'm lying down and I don't have the strength to move. I knit my brows from the pain I suddenly feel all over my body. I feel like the parts of my body have been ripped off me.

"No don't!" I hear the breathy voice of Vrisida.

"All right. Calm down my dear, I'm here. It was a dream," says Ariadne.

"We have to sew the cuts that are deeper or else they will be infected," says Leonidas.

"Do I look like I have a thread and a needle on me?" she replies ironically.

"Do you have a solution for that? Miss perfect?" he says and I feel like he's moving next to me.

A groan is then heard to my left and someone slowly moves towards me. Through the shadows that appear in my closed eyes I see a second body approaching the first.

"Do you feel better?" Leonidas asks suddenly but he doesn't get an answer. From the calm tone of his voice, it seems that there is no trace of the figure. Relief overwhelms me. This means that we are safe for the time being.

"You shouldn’t move," he insists. Gasping continues to be heard near me. "Alexander!" says Leonidas urgently as I hear a body falling next to me. My heart loses a beat. I suddenly feel that my whole body freezes. As if the ice is breaking and I sink deeper into the inner waters of the icy lake.

"I told you not to get up. Why don't you hear me, damn it." he says and I hear his voice breaking as he tries to pick up Alexander.

"Leave me alone," replies Alexander angrily.

"As you wish," says Leonidas and heads with long strides to my right where the girls are. I hear heavy footsteps on the ground and suddenly someone kneels next to me. Alexander touches my face so tenderly that I shudder all over. He approaches me and kisses my forehead. Then he pulls the hair away from my face and grabs my hand. I wish I could see him. To see how he is. To look him in the eyes and understand what he might be thinking. But my eyes do not react and remain sealed.

"Helada?" he then says in a low voice. The worry I hear in his voice splits my heart in two. *I'm fine*, I want to yell at him. "She has high fever, we have to take her to the palace. The nymphs will know what to do."

"Okay," says Ariadne and stands up. She creates a lava ball, I feel a warm air flooding me and then Alexander's voice in my ear.

"Please stay with me." Strong hands lift me off the ground and place me on a warm stretcher by stone which, although convenient, causes me more discomfort.

"Wait a minute," a familiar voice is heard behind us. "What happened? My queen?" ,says my beloved Nymphadora worriedly. Of course! We are still in the Enchanted Forest next to my palace.

"They attacked us..." Ariadne starts and recounts what happened to us.

"And you got here? A figure? This is the first time I hear it. But half a minute," she says and I feel a wave of golden dust heading over me and hitting the center of my heart, forcing me to take a deep breath. I stand up abruptly and look around. My favorite garden is damaged by the hurricane, Vrisida is lying on a stretcher like mine, with Leonidas and Ariadne by her side, and Alexander still holding my hand tenderly. As soon as I look at him in bewilderment, he smiles at me, and the relief is reflected in his bright eyes. He approaches me and touches my cheek. I feel weird. Nausea, heat, joy and fatigue mix inside me making my eyelids close. I lose consciousness and Alexander embraces me just before I lose touch with reality.

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An iced towel is on my forehead as soon as I open my eyes. I look around dazed and see my room. It was like yesterday that I left this palace not knowing if I would see it again. I missed it so much... The door opens and Nymphadora enters with a tray of hot tea and my favorite cookies.

"Have you woken up, my queen? I hope you feel better," she says, leaving the tray next to my bed.

I get up slowly with my elbows to support me and take the towel from my forehead, leaving it on an empty plate on my left. Then I slowly place the tray on my feet and start consuming it. It is the first time I have used all my strength and I confess that I

did not know that I would end up in this situation. So, *so* weak and unable to move my limbs. It was scary that that dark figure could do anything to my body if it fell into his hands. The appearance of this monster, especially, *in* the Enchanted Forest also worries me a lot. I look at Nymphadora with wonder and ask her something that I know will change everything if confirmed:

"I want you to tell me the truth Nymphadora. Did you know that there was another entrance to the Enchanted Forest?" ,she looks at me shyly and sits slowly next to me. "Tell me," I tell her urgently. I have the feeling that I will not like her answer at all.

"Yes," she replies and doesn't look at me.

"And why didn't you tell me? This may be the reason why the crystals were lost. Why didn't you tell me Nymphadora?" I say angrily. She tremblingly hugs herself and says:

"I'm so sorry my queen. It was my fault." I give her some time to explain to me, even though I am ready to explode. "We casted a spell... that didn't go as we expected."

"What spell?" I ask her confused.

"When your family disappeared we were desperate. We tried everything. The last tracking spell we did contained black magic. It was so powerful that... created this portal, making the Enchanted Forest vulnerable to invasions."

"So the crystals disappeared because of this gate. And you didn't tell me anything about this spell all these years." I can't get angry at the reason that prompted her to do this recklessness with her sisters but I can be outraged that she kept it a secret from me.

"Sorry my queen. I didn't want to—"

"Can you go out for a while? I want to be left alone," I say, interrupting her.

"Yes, of course," she replies sadly. As soon as she closes the door behind her I slowly stand up and sit on my windowsill. It is true that if I had her strength, I would try everything to find my family but lying wouldn't be an option for me. When you lie, trust is lost. A thousand times the raw truth than once the lie. Either way, I'll have to find a way to preserve the Enchanted Forest, or it's not just the crystals that will be endangered, but ultimately every form of life in it.

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"How do you feel my Vrisida?" I ask her as I sit next to her on the bed.

"Better," she replies and makes a grimace in pain as she rests the pillows on her back.

"The nymphs told me they tried everything," I tell her sadly.

"I know," she replies and looks absorbed towards the window. I touch her hand and she turns her head and looks at me with tearful eyes.

"I know I shouldn't be asking but... can you..."

"Tell you what happened," she adds, taking me out of the tight spot. Her gaze becomes harsh and she acquires the appearance of a warrior with years of experience in fierce battles.

"I'm sorry I didn't want to—" I say, understanding the stupidity I was doing.

"The moment the hurricane swallowed us, everything turned gray. You disappeared from my side. I was screaming but I wasn't getting an answer. Objects were hitting me and it was difficult for me to avoid them. I would heal the wound and another one would be taking its place. Suddenly in the midst of the whole disaster I see a figure. My eyes were half-closed and I couldn't tell who he was. Thinking it was you or Alexander I approached it. When I realized I was wrong... It was too late." The memory brings pain to her eyes and I flinch at the sound of her description. "I couldn't face him. The more I resisted, the more objects hit me. As if he could control them. Little by little he approached me and..." She pulls her hand off mine and wipes her eyes.

"You don't have to go on. Take some rest," I tell her and I get up but she pulls me by the sleeve.

"No, you have to know. You are the queen. You have to know what you will face."

At the sound of this phrase I am terrified. I'm the queen but I'm scared. My strength has limits and today I have overcome them. No matter what I do, I can't protect everyone. I couldn't protect *her* and that will be chasing me for the rest of my life. "He grabbed me by the neck and inserted his nails into my back."

"Enough is enough!" I say and stand upright. I don't want to hear any more. I can't...

"The pain was unbearable, but just before Alexander attacked him and what you know happened, through my angry voices I heard him say: *The first ingredient is ready*." She may be older than me but right now she looks like my little sister. I approach her and kiss her head stroking her hair.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," I tell her and smile at her.

"Thank you for listening to me," she replies and squeezes my hand.

👑

I sit on the bank of the river outside the palace as I see the sunset. I'm trying to clear my mind of the horrors of the previous day. I haven't talked to anyone else since my meeting with Vrisida. Her words have shocked me. *The first ingredient is ready.* What does this mean?

A whirlwind of thoughts fill the void created by Alexander's absence. Kilian, the hurricanes, the figure, the portal, and in all these mysteries my thoughts run to him. How is he? What does he feel? What is he doing? I throw a pebble into the water and gaze at the circles it creates on its surface. I don't know if I should feel that way. I don't really know what it is that I feel. As soon as I see him, it's like golden dust fills my heart and makes it flutter like a fairy. I sigh deeply.

"Are you okay?" I hear his voice and turn my head abruptly. I open my eyes in panic. Did he hear my thoughts? His face is hidden in the shade of a tree, and I cannot see his expression. I calm my heart and nod. He comes next to me and sits on a rock, with difficulty, grasping his rib.

"Can I help you?" I ask him and he raises his hand stopping me.

"No, you don't have to." I look at him as he tries to get comfortable on the rock. His face is full of scratches, and many spots on his hands have a blue tint. I don't want to imagine what condition his back might be in, although I would love to find out. I blush at the thought and turn my gaze to the bank.

"Thank you," he tells me after a while without looking at me.

"For what?" I answer, looking dazed at the water lilies as they are swept away by the flow of water.

"For saving me," he says seriously.

"I should say that myself." I reply and smile at him slyly. "Those fangs looked very sharp." This comment brings a hasty smile to his lips.

"Do you want to..." I say and wait for him to look at me. "Shall I try?" I show him the wounds he has on his hands and he opens his palm towards me in response. I take his hand in mine and holding my breath I call my strengths. The wounds, that were a while ago on his arm, disappear.

"That's strange. The nymphs couldn't heal me," he says, giving me his other hand. I close my eyes and do the same, only as soon as the power is channeled towards him I feel his hand touching my face. I am surprised at the sudden contact and I open my eyes terrified.

"Sorry, I just..." he says and pulls his hands away. "You see when you use your powers you shine. Not literally. I just feel like something inside you is changing and making you more... unapproachable. I wanted to make sure you are real." I shake my head confused, not being able to fully understand his words.

"But I'm real. I'm by your side right now."

"You don't understand. For us you were a myth. We heard stories about you and your family, about the place you live, about the magic that each generation of kings inherits. For us, ordinary residents of Universo, you were a fairy tale."

Understanding his words is like an arrow piercing my heart. *For us ordinary residents*. He does not distance himself. He admits to being one of them. So for him I am nothing more than an attraction, a living myth. The look of admiration I thought I saw was a look of discovery and curiosity. But how dumb and naive I was! I stand up and look him angrily in the eyes.

"I hope tomorrow you feel better because your *unapproachable* queen wants the whole team ready to watch over Kilian." I turn my back towards him.

"Helada? I didn't mean—" he says and grabs my hand.

"The *Queen* doesn't sound so bad after all," I answer and pull my hand from his grip just before tears start gushing from my eyes.

"Helada?" he shouts behind me and stands up. "Wait." I don't stop and speed up my pace, ready to run if needed.

"Are you all right my queen," says Nymphadora as she appears at the entrance to the palace.

"Tomorrow morning we will talk. Not now," I answer her and run to my room.

All this time I hear Alexander's groans from behind me. As soon as I reach the door of my room I open it and just before I can close it, Alexander's hand grabs my waist.

"Leave me," I tell him, my anger mixing with my tears. He turns me to face him and gently wipes the tears from my cheeks. No, I don't want your pity. "I said leave me, or I'm going to hurt you." He steps closer, his face approaching mine.

"You've already hurt me," he says, smiling and looking at my lips. It's all an illusion. He just wants to conquer the queen. I'm not anyone's trophy though. Just before I can move away from his handle, Ariadne opens the door of her bedroom and looks at us. I hastily remove Alexander's hand from my waist, and coughing I say:

"Ah Ariadne, I wanted you. I want you to notify the rest of the group that tomorrow we have to continue with our plan. I'll tell you the details tomorrow morning," I say hurriedly.

"Of course, Helada," she replies and smiles shyly just before entering Vrisida’s room. As soon as she closes the door, Alexander looks at me again with those green eyes and approaches me.

"Good night," I say to him, pushing him and opening the door of my room before he can touch me.

"Good night, Helada," he says, leaning his shoulder against my doorframe and crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"It’s queen for you," I answer and I do not miss the playful smile that gives me before the door of my room separates us once and for all.

Chapter 24⚘

"This can't be happening," I say, turning my gaze to the rest of us.

"The dumb one," says Adrian angrily, for some reason that only he knows.

They all look like statues as red bloodstains trigger new raids from the Piranias. I can't look any longer. Dora on Daroulis has closed her eyes and hides in his coat, not wanting to face the spectacle either. Dylan tries to avert his gaze and looks at the floor. Caroline has been left with her mouth open in shock. Daniel is expressionless and with his hands in his pockets. Sylvia, wanting to occupy herself with something, warms me up with her lava ball as I tremble with exhaustion.

"Elli, calm down," says Caroline and leans over next to me, gathering my hair in a braid. My sobs prevent me from breathing normally and my hands are numb. She approaches and puts her hands under mine, taking all my weight on her. But the weight on my chest is unbearable. Daniel hasn't said a word so far but has pinned his gaze to the black mass that has swallowed Shawn. His apathy brings more tears to my eyes. I look at him dazed.

"Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you stop him? You were by his side. You were his friend," I say, and my sadness mixes with anger at the unfair outcome of the events.

"I couldn't do anything. He had already made his decision," he says, and I don't see a trace of emotion in his voice.

"What was he thinking?" Adrian says suddenly. I raise my head and look at him, at first with absolute calmness which I do not know where it comes from. I stand upright, wipe my tears and approach him.

"What was he thinking?" I ask him, my anger rising to the surface slowly, like rain that starts weak and turns into hail.

"He sacrificed himself for nothing. He had to think about it better," he says calmly. My irritation is indescribable.

"FOR NOTHING?" I shout.

"Elli please," says Caroline and tries to make me look at her.

"For nothing you put your life in danger before. For nothing you made the attack on our party at Christmas. THAT was for nothing," I shout as I get in front of him.

"Got it?" I say as I push him. I want to channel my anger somewhere. I can't breathe. "Shawn was a thousand times better than you," I add, and although I feel like I'm unfair to him, I don't care. His gaze darkens and he clenches his fists. He purses his lips and looks at me with hatred. I don't care! I turn abruptly and look at the others. None of them speak.

"I'm all ears. Tell me. What are we going to do now?" I haven't looked for a moment towards where Shawn went missing. I want to remember him as he was. With his expressive eyes looking at me with love. With his sturdy hands that hugged me and I felt unique. With...

"Look!" shouts Dora. I lift my gaze and follow with my eyes slowly the point that shows us. I don't want to look because I know what I'm going to see. A mutilated body and blood. Red blood, which will show up in my nightmares. As soon as I make a full turn and lift my eyes, I approach the point where the crack occurred and I see something that I did not expect to happen at all.

I blink many times. What's going on? The terrible Piranias that until a while ago had become a ball are now separated. Slowly a gap is created between them and... I take a deep breath. Fingers, yes I saw fingers moving.

"Shawn?" I say softly with hope. Suddenly, with great force, the Piranias disperse in the water and his body remains in the center. Immobile. He is full of wounds and his blood flows like red color all around. The Piranias, however, do not approach him. His whole body has become an armor with sharp diamond edges. But from his head to his feet there is no trace of skin so where did all this blood come from? I look in horror at the deadly creatures as they move away and re-enter their nests. It's their *own* blood. It's *Shawn* they're afraid of.

Shawn slowly raises his head and looks at me. He looks confused. How can he still hold his breath? As if he thinks the same, he opens his mouth in surprise and bubbles are created in the water. He closes it with his hands. The smile rises on my lips and he realizes it. He comes close to my sphere and rests his hand on the same spot as mine.

We are separated by only a thin layer of glass. My eyes are blurring. He is alive! He’s in front of me. To be honest he *swims* in front of me in the water.

"Sorry to interrupt, but wouldn't it be nice to get out of here before we become aquatics?" says Sylvia behind me.

"Yes," I say and wipe my eyes. I point to Shawn the spot he showed us earlier and he nods his head. He turns and swims quickly towards there.

"I knew it!" Daniel says through his teeth.

"What did you know?" I ask him, not taking my eyes off Shawn.

"Nothing," he says, and I don't have the courage to insist. It's enough for me to see Shawn alive. Anything else can wait. Shawn reaches the cleft between the rocks, like a dam standing guard not letting the rushing waters of the river pour into the city. In our case, however, destruction will help to liberate. With momentum he hits his fists against the stone walls of the cave. His diamond armor remains unchanged as large pieces of rock spring up from everywhere. I did not know that a Luminoso can create such a diamond attire by protecting his whole body. I confess that it would be very useful in times of battle. Not to add that it makes him look like a fairytale hero. With one last punch, light enters the cave and the water is removed in seconds as if a mythical monster had sucked it with a huge straw. Shawn is now at the other end of the cave, perched on a piece of rock, smiling broadly. I lower my hands abruptly and the ball disappears. I take deep breaths and shake my hands trying to rest them. What a relief!

"Come on," Dora says, and motion for us to climb Daroulis.

"He can't carry us all. Go a few at a time," I say and look at my hands.

"And you?" asks Caroline worried.

"I'll find another way." I turn my palms toward the ground and close my eyes, thinking that this was my first thought as soon as I saw the huge void in front of me. Now is my chance. I can do it.

"We'll come back to pick you up," I hear Sylvia's voice after a while not paying attention to my words.

I open my eyes and look at the group as they have moved to the other end of the cave. I am the last. *Elli, what a dumb idea is the one you have. You're going to be killed.* Daroulis is getting ready to make his last flight coming to me with Dora as his guide but I wave at them to stop. If I don't try it now, I don't know when I will find the courage again. Everything is possible as long as we have courage. At least they'll know where they'll find my bones, I think and smile. I feel the air change around me. From suffocating it becomes refreshing. It encircles me, drags my hair into a spontaneous dance and sends a wave of dew through my body. I look at my feet in surprise as they lose contact with the ground and suddenly... I fly to the Glory.

My laughter can be heard in every corner of the cave with the echo creating the illusion that someone is laughing back at me in the same tone. I'm flying over a shallow hole and I am not afraid if it will swallow me. I feel that along with my body moves all the weight I felt inside me. I reach the other end and slowly step into the little space the team has left me. I feel extremely happy.

"You were wonderful," Shawn says next to me, and I raise my head looking at him. In his eyes I see admiration and I feel unparalleled joy. Not only because I made it or because I've started to get used to my new self but also because I feel that he has begun to accept him as well. I look at his body which has been covered as if with diamond hooks, yet it perfectly highlights his abs and I smile slyly.

"No matter how charming the armor makes you, could you part with it for a while? I'd like to kiss you without risking losing my life." He laughs loudly and winks at me as his armor drifts through a blue fog. As soon as the last part of the armor gets lost he pulls me into his arms. I get up on my toes and kiss him, crossing my hands around his neck.

"I thought I lost you," I say, and a tear rolls down my cheek. He wipes it with his finger and puts a lock of my hair behind my ear.

"Sorry. I had to try," he replies apologetically.

"Don't do this to me again," I tell him and hit him on the chest.

"Never, my love," he replies and hugs my head. I close my eyes. Vintage books, roses and now salty water has been added. Which makes me remember of…

"Well, as romantic as this whole thing is, sorry to spoil it for you, but you'll need to see something," Daniel says, and waves at us to go through the opening of the cave. I had forgotten that everyone has been by my side for so long and Adrian is the first to turn his gaze and disappear at once.

"The first ingredient for our freedom is in front of us," says proudly, and we all look at the huge stalagmite that has joined the stalactite in the center of the cave. Fine and now what do we do?

Chapter 25

Are you listening to me people? *Unapproachable*. As if I'm a witch and I cast my magic spells wherever I go driving everyone away from me, I think as we move in the carriage back to Diamante. Is that why my whole family perished? To become more *unapproachable*? Or did I wipe them out so that my loneliness would make sense? Ha. That's it, I found it. I laugh at myself for believing even a little that he might have liked me as I am. Without the title of queen. So, I have to get him out of my mind and not look at him for a start. Yes, this is how my heart will slowly begin to enter the routine that has been living for so many years. No silly boys to distract her. As beautiful as he may be my heart belongs to me. So I'll act like he never existed and keep my distance to give him the message. This is how my title "The unapproachable Queen Helada" will make sense. I huff and in my mind pops up the conversation I had with Nymphadora just before we left the palace:

"I hear you," I say to Nymphadora as she closes the door of my room and flies hesitantly beside me.

"My queen, I know that what we did was unjustified and I apologize on behalf of all my sisters." I exhale and look at her with anger, sorrow and understanding. I can't forget that she has stood by me for so many years and helped me a lot during the period when I lost my family.

"Okay Nymphadora, I forgive you but I don't want you to hide anything from me from now on. I want to trust you. Am I understood?"

"Absolutely my queen," she says, bowing happily. "If I may ask at which point is the investigation of the stones?"

"At zero," I answer and touch my forehead. This whole situation has made me incredibly anxious. If my mother was here, she would have known what would make me feel better. She would comfort me. If my father was here he would have already found the solution. If Eddi was here he would have made a joke making us all burst into unrestrained laughter. If Jacob was here he would... He would have hugged me tenderly and tell me that everything would be fine.

"I don't know if what I'm going to tell you will help you somehow," says Nymphadora suddenly. I raise my head and wait for her to speak. Anything could help right now.

"I remembered that, when we casted the spell, the words spoken were as follows:

Let the mystery of the loss be solved and moved somewhere else. Those who are loved, to be saved, and those who hate, to disappear. Where there is good there is also evil. In the end, let the most powerful prevail.

Those were our last words before the U-gate to the Enchanted Forest was created. But I clearly remember the chill I felt as soon as I said the last word. I felt inside me that something was wrong with the spell but I couldn't identify it. Then one of the nymphs saw a black mass leaving this new entrance of the forest and followed it. By the time the black fog passed the thick foliage it was gone. It may have been some play of light I told her and we didn't mention it again."

What does this mean? That evil prevailed and wiped out both my family and the stones? I raise my eyebrows with wonder.

"Okay, my Nymphadora, thank you. If you remember anything else, please let me know."

"Okay I'll keep you posted. Have a nice trip," she says and with a bow she leaves my room.

I gather my hair and catch it in a ponytail. Good and evil. White and Black. Ying and Yang. All in two shades. Which one will prevail in the end?

👑

The facts are as follows: It's evening. Pitch darkness. I'm wearing my white cape. I'm like a snowflake on a cold winter night with the stars accompanying my descent on the inhospitable asphalt. Another truth is that the others do not share my incredible clothing taste and wear masks and black combat clothes. Yes, as you can imagine! With all the incredible knives and sharp objects. They want to be prepared to deal immediately with any threat that may arise. But I don't need that. Am I right? Because I have my powers and I am fearless. *Am I right*? Who am I kidding? I tremble with impatience and adrenaline. If a cat passes by me now, I'm going to drop dead, I think as I mentally laugh.

We are all standing in the same place where Alexander and I were two days ago. Hidden in the shadows. We are waiting for their arrival. I forgot to mention that

although we did not discover anything new (beyond the U gate, a selfish monster and a hurricane that finds the most inopportune moments to appear) we continue the "Captivity of the Weasel" plan which contains blank spots and the result is 100% doubtful. What could be better than prolonging my anxiety? The most important fact, however, is that since yesterday I have managed not to look Alexander in the eyes even for a moment. Although I successfully avoided him all day, I now feel with strange certainty his gaze on me and I feel anger at his words but also a warmth that fills me with confidence. Yes, I am Helada and yes, I am ready to reveal the secrets of Hans.

Vrisida has fortunately recovered from the attack she suffered, although her wounds have not completely healed yet. I am afraid that bad marks will remain on her body and the cause remains unknown. Why did this happen and who was that monster? I take a deep breath as I recall its terrible form. It was a nightmare! I wonder how after the clear threat to her physical integrity she was more than willing to join us tonight. Which makes me appreciate her even more.

As for the couple... I pretend not to notice every time they join their fingers or when Leonidas tenderly caresses Ariadne's back. It is their right to keep their relationship a secret. Although I am very saddened by this as I thought they had begun to trust me.

"We need to get closer," I hear Alexander's voice which takes me out of my inner monologue and suddenly brings me back to the present. He touches my waist tenderly. Certainly others don't realize it in the darkness but I feel like this move shouldn't have happened. I turn my head slowly in order to push him away but my field of vision is focused on his lips. Don't look him in the eyes Helada. But his lips have the same effect.

"I mean to get closer to the City Hall," he says playfully. I blush all over my face. Ah how I love darkness.

"Yes, of course we should," I answer seriously and abruptly turn my back on the others. Helada, pull yourself together at last. I look around. In the dark, the only thing that stands out is the bright City Hall. It is very strange, however, that most of the houses in the city were destroyed and that it is still standing.

"Here they are," I say after a while as the shadows change shape and two figures appear to our right. Hans and Raton quickly walk towards the main entrance of the building, climb the stairs and just before the door closes Hans turns and looks guiltily towards us.

"Did he see us?" asks Ariadne nervously.

"No way," Leonidas replies in a whisper.

"Let's go," I say impatiently and take a step to get out on the main road. I feel strong hands pulling me back into the darkness. As if in Deja vu.

"Wait. We have to be careful. They may see us," says Alexander in my ear. I swallow and shake my head in the affirmative way.

"That's right. But where are we going to get in?" No one replies. After an awkward moment of speechlessness, I turn to the others, looking at them in wonder. My mind has been drained of ideas. Suddenly Alexander's smile shines in the darkness and his eyes acquire a cunning tinge. "I have an idea."

"You're insane, it seems to me," I say angrily. "If that's the solution you've found, I'd rather do it my way."

"And which one is this?" he replies, crossing his hands on his chest. I look towards the building. The main entrance is prohibitive of course. Consequently...

"Through the window," I say confidently.

"So go ahead," he replies, pointing toward the nearest window. I look him intensely in the eyes. So much effort for nothing. His irony, however, makes me even more angry.

"Gladly." I turn abruptly, put the hood on my head and take a hesitant step forward looking around.

"But—" Leonidas begins to say.

"Let her, as it seems our queen knows very well what to do," Alexander replies, and without turning to look at him I know that it is very difficult for him to hold back his

laughter. Well done Helada, you became a laughingstock again. I hope my plan would work or even my grandchildren will laugh at my stupidity.

After making sure that no one passes by the west side of the building, I quickly walk towards the window stopping every now and then behind carriages or streetlamps. I finally reach breathlessly at the window. I step on boxes and stones and put all my weight on the windowsill. I slowly raise my head and through the curtains I see two shadows moving. Specifically, the tall figure of Hans and the bent mouse. It seems that this window is of Hans's office, where he makes his plans along with his minions. So I have to find another one. I climb down carefully and I turn my gaze towards the group, where the only one who is definitely having fun is Alexander. What a pig my God!

I lower the hood further towards my face and move to the back of the building. The next window belongs to a bedroom. I try to lift it by throwing all my weight on it but it is locked. Unbelievable! In the action books the hero always finds a window as if magically unlocked. Why can't this happen to me too? I turn the whole building around and everything is in the same condition. I return looking down the road disappointed. I feel Alexander looking at me impatiently.

"Well?"

"Fine, you were right," I say, and raise my hands indignantly.

"So we are following Alexander's plan?" asks Vrisida.

"Unfortunately, yes," I say.

"I can do it myself if you want," says Leonidas, feeling my discomfort. But the moment I am ready to answer positively, Alexander speaks first.

"No, I will."

"We would do it but I don't think we can because of our body type," says Ariadne.

"I said I'll do it!" insists Alexander, clenching his fists.

"Everyone will deal with their own part and everything will be fine," I say and look at them one by one. "Thank you for agreeing to help me even if what we are doing makes no sense and is a misjudgment of mine."

"And we thank you for trusting us," Vrisida replies. I take strength from their determined gaze and nod.

"I'm ready," I say and turn to Alexander. "Don't enjoy it too much."

"I'll try," he replies and opens his arms smiling.

"Be careful, okay?" I hear Leonidas' voice full of concern.

"You too," replies Ariadne, worried.

"If something happens, you notify us immediately."

"Okay." I feel behind me a hug and a kiss but what I really hear is my heartbeat.

"Can I?" asks Alexander, pointing at my feet. I look at him thoroughly. Is this a good idea after all? I still have my doubts but I put my arms around his neck anyway. He in one motion lifts my legs off the ground and holds me in his arms. He secures me better in his hands and approaches my face inside the hood.

"I know you don't like the idea of being in my arms *at all* but try to get used to it," he says, kissing my cheek. I open my eyes widely but I don't let him enter my mind.

"I know you don't like touching the unapproachable queen *at all* but I assure you it won't happen again." With this statement of mine he smiles sadly and averts his gaze. My cheek burns from the sudden contact with his lips, and I try with difficulty not to raise my hand and touch it.

"Let's get started," says Vrisida impatiently, and without waiting for an answer, Alexander takes a step forward, moving out into the light.

Chapter 26⚘

According to Nymphadora, the solution would lie in a cave in the shape of a lion and specifically in the union of a stalagmite with a stalactite. But the solution to *what*? And what exactly will be found in this union?

"Do we need to break him?" suggests Dora timidly.

"That's what I was thinking too," Daniel says, smiling at her.

"What if that leads to the collapse of the cave?" says Caroline, pointing upwards. "You see that the most stable roof's support is this point."

Looking at the roof of the cave, it is filled with dark holes that definitely hosts creepy bats. But the landscape in general is unique. Golden stalactites hang from the sky in various sizes, creating shapes like huge curtains that hide centuries of secrets. Around me, thin columns protrude from ground and sky forming a giant monster's mouth with pointed, long teeth and a small shallow lake in the center. To my right, stone stairs lead to another floor inside the cave.

"Is it definitely the spot that Nymphadora pointed out to us?" asks Shawn and looks at me.

"Yes I'm sure that's it."

"Dylan, where are you going?" asks Caroline suddenly. We all turn around and look as Dylan carefully approaches the huge pillar.

"You shouldn't touch it. You're going to ruin its natural growth as our fingers are oily —" Sylvia begins to say but he, as if hypnotized, puts both his hands in the middle of the limestone and... nothing happens.

"Now what did you accomplish?" asks Sylvia, irritated.

"I think... you have to do the same as me," Dylan says, and his eyes have acquired a glassy look.

"Are you alright buddy?" asks Adrian, worried.

"I'm better than well," Dylan replies, and it's the first time I've seen him so excited. "Come on!" We hesitantly approach him and make a circle around the column. I

slowly put my hands on it and the others follow my movement. Suddenly I am overwhelmed by an indescribable joy and I start laughing incessantly, and so does the rest of the company. I don't know what triggers this happiness but it's as if all my dreams have come true just with this move. We all laugh at a joke that has not even been told and I rejoice in their joy. I turn my gaze towards the top of the column feeling a serenity that I haven't felt for a long time but at once my smile disappears. A white body is now hanging from the roof of the cave. I scream and walk away from the column.

"What happened?" asks Caroline, still smiling. I point to the ceiling in fear and at the same time everyone raises their heads. Terror is painted on their faces. Some scream, others take a step back, others close their eyes. But Helada's body remains motionless with the white cape covering her eyes with her blonde hair falling like a curtain over her open frightened mouth.

I can't tell if her form is real or a memory, a ghost. A gust of wind moves the hair from her face. Her eyes are now the only place I focus my attention. Although all her facial features testify to the terror she feels, her *eyes* remain serene and... cheerful. A series of pictures suddenly appear in front of me. Visions so vivid that I close my eyes to get lost. Instead of stopping, however, they pass in front of me even faster. One hill, two forms. Helada and Miedo fighting. The sharp breath of Helada competing with Miedo's angry cry and the cliff waiting for the loser to come into its arms. Time stands still.

"... You won't live much longer. Any resistance you put up is futile." ,I hear his angry voice.

"At least I experienced love. Which I doubt if you know what it means."

Time begins to run forward at breakneck speed. My head turns and just before I lose my balance it stops again. Helada is now dead fixed on a pointed rock. A figure stands next to her. It's not Miedo. Tears fall from his eyes, he approaches Helada and in one move takes her in his arms. He puts his face inside her bloody hair and sobs.

"Who is he?" asks Adrian in wonder, and I open my eyes realizing they are wet.

"What do you mean by *him*? It's clearly *her*," Sylvia says.

"I'm seeing a brunette girl for sure," Dora adds.

"But she's blonde!" Sylvia insists.

"A boy with glasses certainly doesn't look like the picture you're describing," Shawn says.

"You have to check your eyesight diamond boy because surely the boy *I* see is not wearing glasses," Adrian says ironically. Without answering Shawn turns his gaze and puts his arm around my waist.

"What do you say, my love?" My gaze is blurry and I can't get the devastated figure of the boy out of my mind. How tightly he embraced Helada and the sorrow that had overwhelmed him. As much joy as I felt a while ago, so much sadness I feel now. There is nothing worse than losing a loved one and I, as a viewer, felt that my heart could not stand if I were in the position of the boy. I wish I knew who he was and could stand by him.

"Are you okay? Elli talk to me," Shawn says, raising my chin with both fingers.

"No, I'm not," I answer and get lost in his arms. "I want to get out of here." I feel broken and my mind can't concentrate on *why* we are in a cave with strange energy and visions. Shawn kisses my head and passes my hair over my shoulders so that he can clearly see my face.

"Listen to me," he says, and I lift my gaze. "I know you're upset. We all are. But we have to find a solution. We need to find the first element and the rest so that we can finally get out of the forest. I know you miss your family, so you'll need to stay brave for a while longer. With me. Okay?" He caresses my cheek and my tears stop flowing. He is waiting for my reply. Everyone is waiting for it and even if I'm not lifting my gaze to look at them. It is my fault that they are here, so I shouldn't let them down. I take a deep, shaky breath.

"Okay," I reply, and Shawn kisses me on the cheek.

"Very well. So let us come back to the following. What the heck is on the roof? Except for a bat looking at me menacingly right now," Daniel says, earning a smile from Dora.

"Either we have all lost our sanity or each of us sees a dead person on the ceiling," Sylvia says with a shudder. "I start first. I see a tall blonde girl holding her heart in her hand."

"A brunette giant woman with her back full of scratches," Dora says, looking away immediately.

"A boy with black hair, holding his bloody eye," Adrian says.

"The boy with the glasses doesn't have any obvious trauma but he's covered in blood," Shawn says, with Daniel and Caroline agreeing.

"Helada being dead," I say, and everyone looks at me in horror.

"Dylan, and you?" asks Adrian. So far we had not heard his voice but we were not surprised as he is not the most talkative person. "Dylan?" We all turn our gaze. Dylan is not next to us.

"Where did he go?" asks Caroline.

"Dylan? Dude that's not funny," Adrian says, and starts looking behind the big pillars.

"I don't think you'll laugh at what you'll see," a hoarse voice is heard from the stairs to our right. Dylan then slowly climbs down the stairs and when he appears in front of us he is not as he was before. He has *changed*. He is not the boy who has been in the shadows for so long. Now he is the center of attention. Now he *shines*.

🌷

"Dude you're gold," Adrian says dumbfounded. Literally from head to toe the whole body of Dylan has a golden hue. His hair, his face, his clothes, his hands. He comes next to us and automatically the cave is filled with yellow light. Awkwardly he passes his hand through his hair and smiles crookedly. His *teeth* are golden.

"I know," he says, looking at himself in amazement. "I still can't believe it."

"But how?" asks Caroline and approaches him. At first she hesitates to reach out her hand but eventually she looks him in the eyes and touches his cheek. Dylan, still confused, turns his gaze on her. She abruptly jerks her hand back and walks away from him.

"You're frozen," she says, avoiding his gaze. Dylan's wounded expression could crack countless mirrors in an instant. But his facial features change after a while and his eyes harden.

"Just because I became... *this* it doesn't mean that I changed internally," he says angrily.

"I mean, you're literally frozen," Caroline replies, still not looking at him. As if something in his countenance repels her. Something drives her away from him. She comes next to me and her gaze does not even meet my eyes. What's going on?

"Wait a minute," Adrian says, and reaching near Dylan, he touches his hand. "You're really like an ice cube." Dylan doesn't pay attention to his words but continues to look at Caroline with a confused expression.

"Look, I don't know what's going on and this is all new to me too but can you stop looking at me like I'm an alien? Or avoid looking at me altogether?" he adds, staring intensely at Caroline. She lifts her gaze but instead of looking at Dylan she turns towards the large pillar.

"I believe that now some solution can be found to our problem."

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"Dylan will tell us," Caroline replies, looking at the roof of the pillar.

"What can I say?" says Dylan angrily.

"Caroline, can you be more specific?" I tell her. *"Calm down, why are you reacting like that?"* I whisper.

"You're clearly part of the repulsive image we saw," she says, turning toward him. I can't recognize Caroline, she's never been so rude to any person.

"How are you so sure? And why do you look at me like I'm to blame for all this?" asks Dylan and points to the roof.

"I just felt it," Caroline replies, looking at him with apathy.

"Will you give me half a minute?" I say and pull Caroline away from the others. "What's wrong with you?" I ask her angrily after a while. She may have something

personal all of a sudden with Dylan but whatever it is it's not right to react so unpleasantly.

"There is nothing wrong with me. I just felt something inside me as soon as I saw him in this situation that made me wonder if he is the cause of evil," she replies without a trace of emotion.

"You can't believe that, all of a sudden. Something led you to this conclusion," I tell her, unable to believe the girl I see in front of me.

"I just felt it," she repeats more intensely and turns her back on me, returning back to the others. No one is talking. Everyone looks from Dylan to Caroline and the other way around.

"Go ahead. Touch it," Caroline tells Dylan, finally pointing to the limestone. He angrily approaches the pillar and puts his hands on it with force.

"Happy?" he says. But the only thing that changes is its glow that becomes even more intense and... the vision of Helada that becomes even more alive.

"What do you see on the roof Dylan?" asks Caroline in response. He raises his head and looks up. His expression changes, and terror is painted on his face. He lowers his hands sharply and begins to tremble.

"Four bodies," he replies in a low voice. Now Caroline rests her hands on the pillar. This time the vision of Helada disappears and the feeling of unparalleled joy is born again in me. So Caroline was responsible for this feeling. I look at her face more carefully. Her joy spreads all around her to the rest of us and over her. Little by little her body color changes. Her cheeks turn pink and this shade like a disease spreads throughout her body until every inch of her body turns *pink*.

"Caroline?" I say with surprise. Caroline, seeing my startled expression, lowers her gaze to her body and makes an exclamation of surprise. She also shines like Dylan.

"I can't believe it. Sister, you're pink," Daniel says and approaches her. He touches her with caution and immediately pulls out his hand. "And you're burning," he says, rubbing his hands.

"It seems like there are two sources of evil after all, Caroline," Dylan says, smiling complacently. She reciprocates a wild look and turns her eyes to her hands.

"Girl, pink suits you," Dora says cheerfully.

"I have an idea. Why don't you both put your hands on the pillar?" says Sylvia.

Caroline looks at Dylan with a challenge. He smiles at her and approaches the column where the stalagmite joins with the stalactite. He puts his hands on it first, followed by Caroline. The glow they emit is indescribable. Gold and pink become one and the joyful sorrow that is born in us is unimaginable. Whatever strange power they have is very strong and creates an earthquake that makes us all bend our legs. A deafening sound is heard as the column breaks in two and pieces of stalactites fall like rain on us. Before they can injure someone, my sphere traps the group and isolates the chaos that is created around us.

"We need to get out of here," I yell at the others.

"To the stairs, quickly," Shawn replies, pointing to the opening that is still to our right.

"FOLLOW ME," I shout as a large mass of limestone falls on my ball. We all move towards the stairs and after passing them a large corridor appears. I don't look back as we run towards the light at the end of the tunnel, but I wish everyone is behind me.

"WE'RE GETTING CLOSER," I shout as a big stalactite falls behind us. With one last breath I walk out of the exit of the cave. I run towards the Enchanted Forest following the advice of Nymphadora. Regardless of whether the whole thing was a failure, we tried. We have to find another way to get the first ingredient.

"Elli, wait," I hear Shawn's voice behind me. I stop out of breath and look behind me. I count the faces and I am relieved when all eight of us are safe. I turn to them and hug Caroline.

"I was so scared," I tell her, and I realize she no longer has the pink hue she had.

"It's all right. We're all fine," she replies, kissing me on the cheek.

"It was all done for nothing though," says a disappointed Daniel.

"I don't think so," Dylan says, smiling broadly and giving his hand to Caroline. "Are you going to show it, or should I?"

"I will of course," she replies, stealing something from his palm that we don't have time to see. He whispers something in her ear and she replies something urgently to him.

"Well, the first ingredient it is not an ingredient. It's something more valuable. Something you won't imagine you'd ever touch in your life. Something that—"

"Caroline wrap it up," I tell her, unable to wait any longer. She opens her palm and... I don't believe my eyes.

"Behold Lumina's stone!" she says with a laugh.

Chapter 27

Sweet caramel and vanilla. How many emotions can a perfume create? As much as a beautiful face, a touch, a smile. Their combination of course could stop your heart and force you to take deep breaths. Breaths I can't take right now as all my emotions are trying to drown me. Anxiety, indignation, anguish, disappointment, joy, hope, happiness, love. Alexander's arms are hot as he holds me by the waist and legs leaving my cape floating irregularly on my back. Its smell, the sweetest thing I have ever experienced. In the short distance between our hiding place and the entrance to City Hall he was kind enough not to make any comment about our situation and to leave my heart in its place. However, he never stopped smiling along the way as if he had finally achieved his goal, for me to fall into his arms. How he irritates me! We arrive at the door and he knocks twice. He lowers the hood from my head and fixes my hair. Every inch of my body shudders.

"It'll be easier for you to pretend that my charm did this to you," he whispers and smiles. He couldn't keep his mouth shut after all. I can't stand him!

"Be careful because with one move you can lose every inch of that charm," I tell him creating a small lava ball confirming my claim.

"I knew you found me charming after all," he replies, winking playfully. Before I can answer him properly, the door opens and a young girl appears in front of us in black clothes and a white apron. I don't have time to see her features as I close my eyes abruptly pretending to be dizzy.

"How can I help you?" the girl asks in a low voice.

"Our queen got dizzy all of a sudden on her walk and would have to lie down immediately as her hotel is far away from here," says Alexander with the seriousness befitting a guard. Could he keep that voice as he addresses me? Then everything would become easier.

"Of course, follow me," the girl replies softly. Alexander enters the building and I half-open my eyes. I hold an exclamation of surprise just before it comes out of my mouth. Hans's City Hall-house is like a big, illuminated Christmas tree. Lights in shades of yellow and white are carefully hung on the walls and the central staircase. The hallway adorns a huge red carpet and two statues to the right and left of the

entrance, representing a man and a woman who are naked trying to catch each other. Very strange reception I can say. I feel Alexander's head moving as we go up to the first floor.

"Could we use the bathroom?" asks Vrisida politely, understanding Alexander's signal.

"Yes, it's on the second floor, the second door on the right," the girl replies.

"What is your name if I'm allowed to ask?" asks Leonidas just before following her instructions.

"Aphrodite," she replies shyly.

"What a wonderful name! So, thank you very much, Aphrodite," says Leonidas and I feel the girl lowering her gaze blushing all over. Fortunately, Ariadne is not among us at the moment, otherwise I would not like to be in Leonidas' place.

"Follow me," Aphrodite tells us after a while. As we turn right I close my eyes abruptly because of the sudden alternation of light. Everything shines, in the color of gold. From the carpet we step on to the ceiling and the chandelier. As if everything is lined with golden dust. However, the doors are red and have irregular numbers on them. We proceed to the depth of the corridor. 20 150 35 240 500... and finally Aphrodite opens with a key the door with the number 1. I wonder what these numbers mean. Could there be different numbers on all *three* floors of the building?

"Come in," the girl says as she opens the room's light. I can't open my eyes lest I be noticed, so I let my other senses understand the aura of the room. Surely there is some open window as cold wind moves the hair on my face. Alexander's footsteps are silent so the room is probably carpeted from end to end.

"Thank you very much. Could you bring some food and water for our queen?" says Alexander, holding me tightly.

"Of course. I will also notify the master of your arrival. Do I need to call the doctor to examine the queen?" asks Aphrodite.

"No if there is any deterioration, I will call him. Also tell Mr. Hans that when our queen feels better he is welcome to visit her. Again, thank you for your hospitality," says Alexandros seriously.

"Of course," Aphrodite replies, and I hear the door close. Her footsteps are not audible as she moves away, but I count the seconds as I did while climbing the stairs and crossing the aisle. A minute passes and I open my eyes facing once again the beautiful green eyes of Alexander.

👑

"And now it's just the two of us," says Alexander, smiling crookedly. I do not answer him and turn indifferently my gaze towards the room, which is dazzling. Blue shades fill the armchairs to my left and the bed to my right, which is huge, with pillows that look as if they are the softest in the world and with a huge transparent curtain in the color of the sea. I turn my head behind us and see a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Agua River and Dakota Mountain. The picture is riveting!

"You can leave me on the bed now," I say, finally looking at Alexander again.

"I was sure that's all you were thinking about," he replies, and his sly smile resurfaces. Sweet caramel and vanilla, soft pillows and this view? I could think like him but...

"Alexander, all I think is that what we are doing is very dangerous," I say irritably.

"But we're not doing anything... yet," he replies and approaches my ear. A knock on the door makes him bounce and leave me abruptly on the bed. An exclamation of pain escapes my mouth as I forcefully fall on my right hand.

"Who is it?" says Alexander seriously.

"I am Aphrodite, sir," the girl replies, and I immediately get under the blankets, closing my eyes.

"Come in," he says, hiding his anxiety. The door opens and I hear the dinnerware as Aphrodite leaves it on my bedside table.

"Is everything all right? I heard speeches before I entered. Did our queen recover?"

"Unfortunately not yet, you may have misheard. Thank you very much again. I'll call you if there's an improvement," says Alexander, accompanying Aphrodite to the door. I hear the door close and open my eyes. Alexander exhales as he throws his weight on it. I rub my right shoulder that was shaken by the sudden fall. Alexander with two fast steps comes next to me and falls to his knees.

"I’m sorry Helada. Are you hurt?" he says and taking my hand in his.

"No, I'm okay," I reply as I swing my legs out of bed. I pull my hand from his and look awkwardly elsewhere. If I just think that he is so close to me, I may not be able to move away from him. I stand up and look at the window.

"How much longer do you think we'll have to wait?" I ask him, wanting to change the topic of conversation. He stands up and comes behind me.

"I don't know. As soon as they learn something, however, they will come to notify us," he says seriously, visibly hurt by my move.

"Helada, I want to talk to you," he adds and I feel a caress on the back of my neck.

"We don't have anything to say," I answer and approach the window, close it and sit on the couch in front of it, pulling my knees to my chest. I am very nervous about what we are going to discover today and I am not ready for this debate.

"Helada?" says Alexander as he takes a step towards me. My name as a question, as a plea on his lips, forcing me to turn around and look at him. His gaze is a combination of the wild sands of the desert and the heavy, black stones of the seabed. So many emotions lurk in his eyes that they make me wonder if I was too harsh to him after all. "I—" he starts to say but is interrupted by a knock on the door of the room. The door opens abruptly, and Hans's mischievous smile completes the following disingenuous sentence: "My queen. I'm so glad you're already feeling better."

👑

"Mr. Hans!" I say in surprise and stand up.

"Please don't get up," he says, and confidently comes before me, takes my hand in his and kisses its knuckles. Alexander's gaze darkens at once and clenching his fists takes a step forward.

"Sorry for the rudeness but I'm sure I mentioned to Aphrodite that we would notify you when our queen would feel ready to visit her." Hans, not paying attention to Alexander's words, slowly raises his head and his crow-colored hair falls on his brown eyes which focus on mine with an intensity that I am experiencing for the first time in my life. I also see a few spots of yellow color in them that make his eyes look

like sunbeams. They are intoxicating, piercing and... charming? In terms of age, there is a gap of a decade between us, but right now he looks like a teenager.

"I didn't want to bother you, my queen. It's just that as soon as I was informed of your situation, I couldn't keep away from you. I had to make sure you were okay," he says, still holding his hand to mine.

Alexander casts a piercing gaze at me as he looks at our joined hands. I nod at him to leave us alone. I have to distract Hans for as long as I can. Alexander's eyes do not move from mine. *We hadn't planned anything like that*, like they are saying. Hans turns his gaze towards Alexander.

"Shouldn't your guards be further away from you, my queen?" asks Hans with a sudden glee.

"You're right, Mr. Hans—"

"Please call me Hans," he says, stroking my hand. Alexander is ready to to pounce on him. I gently pull my hand from his grip. He may be charming but that doesn't give him the right to touch me. Also, I do not forget so easily the picture I saw the first day I came to Diamante.

"I'd rather keep the plural. As I was saying my guard just carried me up to the couch when I recovered, as I was still weak. Now he could go back to his post which is outside my door."

"As you wish, my queen," Alexander replies, bowing down. As he lifts his eyes he looks at me questioningly: *What are you doing?* I look at him as if to tell him that I know very well what I am doing, although deep inside I know that I have no idea.

"Please sit down, I will bring you the tray myself. You must be feeling exhausted," says Hans as soon as the door closes, leaving us alone. I don't like the idea of being in a bedroom with him at all but I'll have to adapt.

"Yes, as I was strolling through the cobbled streets of Diamante I suddenly felt dizzy. Luckily we were near your house," I say lightly.

Hans leaves the tray containing a hearty meal on a table to my right and sits next to me. Very close to me. I look at the tray awkwardly. Roasted meat with overcooked

potatoes, salad and rosé wine fill its surface. My belly makes strange sounds at the sight of the meal.

"You should be very hungry. Please," says Hans, pointing to the tray. I can't resist anymore and I take the tray in my hands. As I cut the meat I feel Hans holding his breath next to me. I put the first piece in my mouth and make an exclamation of delight. Hans's laughter is suddenly heard from end to end. So scary that I forget for a moment how to swallow. "I'm glad you're enjoying your meal my queen." I don't answer and he doesn't embarrass me again. As soon as I finish my meal, I leave the tray on the table and turn my gaze towards the window. The stars illuminate the river and create a reflection on its waters. The moon is hidden behind the mountains, and the Boske Forest to the west forms a black mass of trees and animals of the forest.

"Do you feel better?" he says after a while.

"Yes, much better," I answer and think about where our conversation might lead.

"I'm very happy about that. I'd like to ask you something if you have the kindness," he says touching my hand. I politely pull my hand out of his grip again.

"I would ask you not to touch me without my consent," I tell him and sit further away from him on the couch.

"Sorry, it's just that what I want to ask you imposes this gesture," he says and smiles, revealing a series of white teeth.

"I know we didn't get off to a good start. I was abrupt with you as the days after the hurricane made me very irritable. I believed that placing guards throughout the city would bring results, but all it did was scare the inhabitants of Diamante."

"And what is your question?" I ask with wonder. I cannot follow his reasoning.

"My question is if you can forgive me for my rude behavior," he says, and I feel he has indeed regretted it. Or he's just a very good actor.

"If indeed the reasons were what you told me, I forgive you. But if I realize again any mistreatment towards the residents I will take my measures," I warn him and look at him sternly.

"Thank you so much for understanding my queen," he says and extends his hand for the third time but seeing my fierce gaze takes back the gesture immediately.

"Well, I'll leave you to get some rest. It's too late... You can stay for as long as you want in my house. You and your guards," he says, getting up from the couch.

"We'll stay tonight for now," I answer and get up.

"Good. Have a nice evening," he says, bowing deeply.

"You too," I answer seriously. He inclines his head once to the right and looks at me intensely.

"You are very similar to your mother," he says, smiling and leaving the room before I could grasp the meaning of his sentence.

Chapter 28⚘

It's so glamorous, I would recognize it from miles away. My grandfather had described in detail each recess it has, the size, even the two cuts at the top. Its bright blue color and its *glow*. The moment my mind forms this word, a glow appears next to me, so intense that it makes me avert my gaze from the stone.

"Brillar!" I say as the blue flame stands on my shoulder.

"Did she reappear?" asks Caroline cheerfully.

"She probably wanted to congratulate us on achieving," Dora says, laughing.

"But what did we achieve?" asks Dylan questioningly.

"To find the stone!" says Caroline as if his question is out of place.

"Right, so *what*? Is the Lumina stone the first ingredient to get out of the forest?" he replies and crosses his arms on his chest.

"He's right," Adrian says, thoughtfully. "Nymphadora trapped us here to find the stones. There are no ingredients to break the spell of our confinement," he concludes and hits his fist on a tree trunk.

"She trapped us?" asks Dora questioningly. "Are you saying that she was also responsible for the creation of the invisible wall at the entrance of the forest in the first place?"

"I don't know for sure but it's very likely," Adrian says angrily.

"Guys? May I remind you that I have one of the four stones of Universo in my hands?" says Carolina excitedly, without paying attention to the dialogue that takes place around her. At this statement, Brillar leaves my side and approaches the stone. Side by side they have exactly the same color. The moment they come into contact everything turns white, golden figures fill the air.

"What's going on?" asks Sylvia, terrified.

"Feel, listen, act," says a female voice.

"*Let the mystery of the loss be solved and moved somewhere else. Those who are loved, to be saved, and those who hate, to disappear. Where there is good there is also evil. In the end, let the most powerful prevail,*" the voice of Nymphadora is heard.

"Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore. At some point you will understand what you have lost and you will struggle to win it back. Only in this way you will be able to free yourself, otherwise I will crush you. The battle will be uneven but you will continue to fight. The beginning and the end can become one if you continue to seek your boldness," Miedo says sinisterly.

"Elli have courage," the voice of Helada through a distant dream.

A whirlwind of sounds and images of the past stir in front of us. A thunder and everything calms down. I open my eyes and look around. The Glory team is scattered on the ground and one by one they are now slowly standing up. The only one missing is...

"Brillar?" I ask as I search for her.

"Here I am," a familiar voice replies, and we all follow its sound. We approach Caroline, who tentatively opens her palm. The stone is still in her hand and Brillar is missing.

"Although my form changed, I'm still here," the voice is heard again. This time near the stone.

"Brillar?" I ask again.

"Call me Helada," says the stone, shining like a blue star.

"Did I hear right? Did she say Helada?" asks Caroline with wide eyes.

"Yes, it's me," says the stone. The *stone*. The stone that *speaks*. Caroline's hand begins to tremble with shock. So she slowly leaves the stone on the ground.

"Is Brillar queen Helada?" asks Sylvia, surprised.

"That’s not possible," I say, and look at the stone on the brown and green leaves as it pulsates with a bright blue glow. *Glow*! Like Brillar's. I lower my body and stand on my knees above the stone.

"If she is Brillar, how can we see her too?" asks Shawn aptly.

"I don't know," I reply.

"I'll explain to you." ,the stone suddenly says, and we all hold our breath as the forest turns into a golden scene of another world. "Sit please, we'll go back in time for a while," says the stone, and Helada’s voice sounds as if moving away in a tunnel without end.

~

"My queen, what are we going to do?" says Nymphadora, agitated, flying from one end of the room to the other.

"At any moment Miedo arrives with his army. He is determined to take your powers. To conquer Universo. To become our master," she adds the last sentence in a squeaky voice. Helada does not answer to Nymphadora but leaves her alone in the room and heads to the small chapel of the palace, with the countless icons of the Saints, where she prays and falls on her knees crying loudly.

"Helada?" a male voice is heard. Helada raises her head and sees a boy with glasses and the kindest green eyes of Universo. Helada, with tears in her eyes, comes out of the small chapel and approaches him.

"Are you sure you want to do it? You may not have to. Maybe—" before finishing his sentence Helada falls on him and hugs him tightly, sobbing. Tears also form in his eyes as he caresses her hair.

"Please don't cry," he tells her tenderly. She raises her eyes and looks at him.

"There is no other solution," she replies and walks away from his warm embrace. "Goodbye Alexander," she says, running towards her room.

"No, Helada wait. I want—" The scene changes and Helada is alone again with Nymphadora.

"Do it Nymphadora," says Helada and closes her eyes.

"As you wish," replied Nymphadora, filling her hands with gold dust.

"Let the mystery of the loss be solved and moved somewhere else. Those who are loved, to be saved, and those who hate, to disappear. Where there is good there is also evil. In the end, let the most powerful prevail," Nymphadora rests her palm on the heart of Helada until her body absorbs even the slightest grain.

"Is it done?" asks Helada, opening her eyes and breathing deeply.

"Yes, my queen. If Miedo manages to conquer Universo and... kill you, pieces of your soul will be scattered across different parts of Universo, the stones and people who deserve it. So he will not be able to acquire your powers and will be trapped in the Bosque Forest forever."

"Are you ready for that possibility?"

"Yes, we are to blame and we will pay for our mistake," Nymphadora replies seriously.

"Ah my Nymphadora," says Helada and hugs the nymph tightly. "Thank you for everything."

"What are you saying my queen? I should have been in your place. I wish from the bottom of my heart that the reversal spell will never be activated," says Nymphadora and starts crying.

"Don't cry my Nymphadora. It's the only solution and I'm ready for the end..." replies Helada and their forms become a whirlwind, returning us back to the present.

~

"What do we have to do with all this?" asks Adrian first, and he gets up from the ground in frustration.

"Each of you has a piece of my soul," says the stone-Helada, as if that's the most normal thing that exists.

"What?" asks Daniel, looking at himself.

"You all somehow held a special place in my heart. My reward, then, to you is the provision of part of my power, which is interpreted differently in each body."

"So that explains it..." says Shawn, reminding me of his armor and ability to breathe in water. And Dylan, Caroline, me...

"We were very young when you lived and I don't remember ever meeting you in person," Sylvia says, thoughtfully.

"On the contrary, your parents and grandparents knew me. But the *way* they met me you have to find out for yourself."

"What do you want from us?" I ask, staring intensely at the stone.

"Whatever I wanted from the beginning, my Elli, to have courage and bring peace to Universo," she adds, and the glow of the stone fades away completely.

"What happened?" asks Caroline, taking the stone in her hands.

"I wish I knew," I answer and huff in frustration. What does all this mean? What does a part of her soul mean? Is that why I saw her in my dreams and lived moments from her life? But why me and not the rest of us? Why do I have so many different powers? And Daniel, Dora, Sylvia and Adrian? Do they also have a separate power? Which member of my family could know the queen? Is it my grandfather or father? So many unanswered questions confuse my mind.

"What are we going to do now?" asks Dora, nervously.

"It seems that Nymphadora led us to where we hoped without even knowing it. We found the first stone of Universo! So it remains to find the rest of them and then we will be able to neutralize Miedo, get out of the forest, but also bring peace to Universo, as the queen said," I say and look at the stone. I knew that there was a possibility that my suspicions would come true but I never thought that the result would be so confusing. Our confinement in the forest, the hunt from Miedo, the powers of Helada, the connection of all of us with her...

"There is no turning back. We'll have to find them no matter what. Only this way we will be able to get out of here," I add, and I take the stone from Caroline. I call my powers and make a small sphere around it for protection.

"I thought all this was only in your imagination. In your dreams," Adrian replies in a low voice. I raise my eyes and look at him confused.

"And?" I ask him, and my anger begins to boil inside me.

"And the only reason I came with you was to have fun. Not to die saving the world," he replies and raises his hands indignantly.

"May I remind you that you are wanted in Oscura? And that you had nothing better to do than to invade parties uninvited? And that this would give you a little bit of a good reputation? What do you think of these reasons?" I answer and cross my arms over my chest.

"He's right man. After all, there is nothing else we can do. We are trapped here. Think of it as the only way to get out," Dylan says.

"You basically threatened me to come here which I doubt happened to the rest of you," Adrian insists. The silence of the others confirms his claim.

"You could refuse and hide in another burrow if you didn't want to. Don't you dare throw it at us. It was your decision," I answer and turn my back on him. "Find another solution if you don't like mine."

"That's what I'm going to do," he replies, and I hear his footsteps on the dry leaves of the forest quickly moving away from us.

"Adrian? Where are you going?" shouts Dylan. "I'm coming back," he says, running after him.

"The only thing that has escaped us is the riddle we had found at the base of the statue of Miedo. It might help us find the second stone," I say as if Adrian's absence hasn't hurt me in the slightest. In reality, however, I'm very disturbed by his behavior. I thought he wanted to be among us. That he liked our mission, the company we made... That he wasn't necessarily with us and that we slowly won him over each one with his own way. I thought he cared, that he didn't think I was a fantasist. I guess it was *all* in my imagination after all as he said. I turn to the rest of them and a question arises in my mind.

"Do you think we should give up everything and find another solution?" I ask and hold my breath. Was I wrong? Did I condemn them all with my choices?

"No, my love, I agree with you," Shawn says, kissing my head and running his hand over my shoulders reassuringly.

"And I my Elli, we *wanted* to follow you and you are not to blame for what follows," says Caroline and smiles sweetly at me.

"For my part, I wanted to avenge the destruction of my house," Dora says resolutely.

"And I want to protect the forest from Miedo's future plans," Sylvia replies. I look at Daniel.

"Don't look at me, I wouldn't leave Caroline alone in a forest of bloodthirsty monsters," he says, and we all laugh. I lift my eyes and see Dylan returning alone from the depths of the forest.

"I couldn't convince him," he says sadly as soon as he arrives next to us.

"Won't you go with him?" asks Caroline in wonder. He looks her in the eye and replies: "He may have decided on my arrival here but I choose to stay... with *all* of you," he says the last words with hesitation as if he is holding on with difficulty not to say the real reason for his stay. However, Adrian's absence creates a feeling of insecurity in me. I was used to his mean comments, his jokes, his smile... He made his choice and as much as I am bothered by his decision I will have to accept it. As much as it hurts me. As much as I'll miss him.

"So, where do we start?" asks Caroline excitedly.

"From giving me the first stone," the voice of my nightmares is heard. I lift my eyes, and from one moment to the next, the entire forest is filled with Bestias, with Miedo standing in the center holding... holding Adrian's bloody arm.

Chapter 29

I find myself alone with Alexander on the bed of room 1. It has dawned and dark circles are forming around his eyes. All night long he stood outside my room guarding me while I tossed and turned in bed without falling asleep. Now we sit ready to read the letter that Leonidas wrote us a few hours before he left with Vrisida (and Ariadne who was waiting for them across the street from the city hall) for the hotel.

"Why didn't you knock on my door earlier, since you had the letter in your hands so many hours ago?" I ask him anxiously.

"I didn't want to wake you up," he replies, smiling sweetly.

"Do you think I slept at all?" I tell him and point to the letter. "Have you opened it?" "No, I wanted us to read it together," he replies and opens it. I take a deep breath and start reading impatiently.

~

My Queen and Alexander,

After we went up to the second floor and checked all the doors, which contained various strange numbers, the only one that was open was the bathroom, so Vrisida stayed there as a distraction and I carefully went down to the first floor. This floor also contained red doors with numbers but the only one that shed light on the hallway was the one with the number 0 at the end of the corridor. I stood in the shadows and tried to listen to the conversation taking place inside the room. I managed to hear the following:

"I want you to increase the patrols, Raton. Put guards in every corner of Diamante and talk to your superiors in Lumina. They should do the same in the capital," says Hans.

"Of course. Fear will help us," replies Raton cheerfully.

"Fear is always our ally, but with caution. Already the queen is entangled in our legs and I don't want her to understand our plan," Hans says.

Unfortunately, at that moment Aphrodite appears from the staircase, who comes quickly and notifies Hans of your arrival. Don't worry, no one saw me, but I couldn't

hear anything else. But... as soon as Hans and his minion came out of the office and I made sure they were far enough away, I opened the door and walked in. The office was simple with a huge table in the center and two brown armchairs. Maps of Universo adorned every inch of the wall but as I approached the table, a different map was on its glass surface. A map with numbers like those on the doors. Each number was located on a different Universo's city. I apologize to you my queen, I was unable to memorize numbers and areas as the office door suddenly opened and Raton appeared, I hid under the desk. He picked up the map and left the room again. I searched the drawers for a similar map but there was no one like it. This is the information i collected and I regret that I have not been able to make much progress.

See you soon,

L.

~

"I knew he fooled me!" I say and punch my fist on the bed. This insidious scum.

"What do you mean?" asks Alexander.

"He assured me that it would not be repeated, that raising the garrison was a tactic stemming from the need to protect residents after the hurricane."

"I wouldn't believe anything that comes out of his mouth," says Alexander seriously.

"Then he told me something else that I can't get out of my head," I say and my eyes suddenly can't focus on one point. The furniture around me is blurring and returning to its normal form all the time. My mind goes blank and the memory of the last sentence Hans said comes to the surface.

"What did he tell you?" asks Alexander and turns his whole body towards me.

I turn my head as if hypnotized and looking at his face, but without actually looking at it, I answer him with blurred eyes: "That I look like my mother."

"Everyone knows this if they've seen the queen and you even once," he replies seriously.

"It's the *way* he said it. As if he knew her personally," I say skeptical. His eyes flashed as soon as he mentioned her. He knew my mother very well, I feel it. I can't get out of

my head the idea that I've heard his name before. Had the father mentioned him? Any of my siblings?

"We still have a lot of secrets to discover," says Alexander and gets up from the bed. He opens his palm and offers me his hand, hesitantly I give him mine and get up as well. For some reason I feel that he is not only referring to Hans this time.

👑

We decided that it would be better to return to the hotel so as not to attract further attention from Hans, who said goodbye to me with a kiss on my hand and the prospect of meeting again soon. As if I didn't have anything better to do!

"I think we need to revisit the waterfall where the hurricane came from," I tell the others as we sit at the hotel lobby.

"And what are we going to do with Hans?" asks Leonidas.

"He said that fear is an ally. A hurricane that destroys people's homes and property can cause fear," I say skeptical.

"And what about that? How did he manage to reconcile with the uncontrollable natural phenomena?" asks Ariadne in wonder.

"And let's not forget the monster we met there," says Vrisida, terrified.

"I know it's very dangerous and I don't want you to follow me if you're not feeling comfortable," I say and look mostly at Vrisida. "But I feel like something is lurking there."

"I'll be wherever you are," Vrisida says firmly, and I look at her with gratitude. I don't know if I would have so much devotion to a man if I were in her place.

"I think Hans somehow created the hurricanes to cause chaos," Alexander says, reading my thoughts.

"But how can Hans be connected to hurricanes? It's impossible!" asks Ariadne.

"Not only the hurricanes but also the floods in Rubina, the earthquakes in Oscura and the fires in Grisa," I answer with certainty.

"Since when does he have the powers to do that?" says Leonidas.

"I know someone who owns them and can be working with him," I reply expressing aloud the thoughts that appeared like fireflies in my mind from the moment I read about Hans' plan. Fear is an ally. Who is a better ally than a nightmare?

I find myself again next to the beautiful waterfall. Next to the crystals that are created and as they fall into the hot water they degrade. How could nature reciprocate the damage you caused her? Through a rain, a snowfall, an earthquake. But again, something good will come out of this move. Rain will irrigate the soil, accelerating flowering. Snowfall will freeze the flow of water preventing flooding. The earthquake will tear down buildings that need demolition. But if it's angry... It will turn rain into hail, destroying all crops. It will create frozen lakes- traps for passers-by. It will throw down your house the moment you inhabit it. Who could tame nature? The human? Who pollutes it? No! But an effort does not hurt. Let's start by taking small steps at a time. Our first step will be to minimize the damage or better yet, to find the cause of it and how to deal with it.

"May I ask if we are looking for something specific? Or like last time we are looking for anything unusual?" asks Leonidas.

"I think it would be better to sit down and enjoy the scenery," I answer and sit on a rock. The rest of them look at me in wonder but one by one they also sit around the bank.

"It's so beautiful!" Ariadne says, and Leonidas tenderly kisses her hand.

"The sound of water always calms me," I agree.

"It's going to get dark soon. Perhaps we should hasten our search a little?" asks Alexander visibly nervous.

"Dude, I think you should sit down. You will feel better," Leonidas replies. Alexander, looking at us one by one, sits reluctantly on a rock to my right.

"Think about who you want to be with at this exact place, close your eyes and wish it," I say in a moment. I don't know how it came to my mind but I liked the idea. For my part, I wished I was with my family. I open my eyes and a comet-like star falls from the sky. I turn my gaze and smile at the others. Everyone looks at me with bright

eyes. I will keep this moment forever in my heart. It's the first time I've felt like I'm really connecting with these people. Alexander's eyes stay on me for a few more seconds. I don't know who each of them may have wished for but I hope it made them feel safe and calm for a while. We stay there for hours until the gray horizon turns blue and then black bringing frost by the river bank.

"I am so glad I met you," I say after a long time. My words like a final goodbye. Like a memory that will soon hurt. I stand up and look at each one individually. In their eyes, a question is formed.

"So are we Helada," says Vrisida.

"I wish I had time to get to know you better," I answer and immediately call on my strength.

"Helada, what are you doing?" asks Alexander, terrified and stands up at once with the others.

"Sorry for bringing you this far, I just wanted to say goodbye to you appropriately," I reply and create a sphere around me.

"Don't do whatever you think of doing. We're *all* in this together," says Ariadne, raising her hands reassuringly. Tears form in my eyes. I didn't want them to be in front of what I'll do but it seems I'm too selfish to do it myself eventually.

"Thank you," I say and crying I turn my back and start running.

"Helada nooo," I hear Alexander behind me and his heavy footsteps following me. I run into the U gate that leads to the Enchanted Forest and shout with all my might.

"Nightmare! Give me the biggest hurricane you've ever made." In response, my enchanting garden darkens at once like a cloud overshadowing its beauty. Flowers are uprooted from the ground, and all the animals hide in their nests. I feel the air changing, the atmosphere pulsating. The darkness becomes even darker. I tremble with adrenaline and fear. I don't know if my plan will work but it's worth a try.

"Helada please," I hear Vrisida's voice behind me. I turn around and see all three of them at the entrance to the forest.

"Go away. ALL OF YOU," I shout as a roar, so loud that I can't feel my heart, rips through the air.

"NOW," I say as a gray giant forms in front of me.

I no longer see the sky, only a burst of wind so strong that I lose my balance. I look it in the eye. It roars and attacks me. My sphere repels it but not for long. It creates a huge punch which breaks my protection and throws me to the ground. I don't see anything anymore. Neither the forest, nor my company. I'm on my own. As I was for a long time. I stand up. *"Feel, listen, act,"* says my mother. I feel rage, I hear your voice mother and... It's time to act.

I look the enemy in the eye. He rages, destroys everything. That's what he's made for, after all. I call on my strengths, one at a time and create a ball in my hands that contains all the injustice and anger that I hold within me. Injustice for their loss and anger for the absence of peace in my country. When it is impossible for me to hold it in my hands any longer, I direct it screaming at him and he slowly and steadily absorbs it. It did not destroy him, it made him stronger. No! He grows even bigger. It's like it penetrates into every happy part of my heart. I fall to my knees. I had a little hope that maybe it would succeed. At least I tried, I think as tears gush from my eyes. I lift my gaze. He screams from the triumph he feels and I wrinkle on the ground. It's time to accept it. The end has come! I close my eyes just before feeling the rage of the hurricane on me mentally apologizing to my people for not being able to protect them. The noise becomes deafening, the laughter satanic. I furiously close my ears. I pray one last time and relax my body. Goodbye.

~

They say that when you die, depending on your actions in earthly life, you are also led to a certain path. I can't judge if I deserve to be in paradise, but I wish I was a part of it right now. But the wind is still very strong and I can't move my limbs. Did I find myself in hell because I left my people at the mercy of a monster? A caress in my hair so tender and true... No, I'm probably somewhere in between. I wish I could meet with my family. Their absence for so many years made me believe that they were dead after all. I've missed them so much! A kiss on the forehead. It's probably my father's. A kiss on my right cheek. It must be my mother's. Two kisses on my left

cheek. Definitely from Eddi and Jacob. So they are here with me, I open my eyes with longing to face them but... I blink, I look around.

"Can you stop doing this?" a male voice asks me.

"What am I doing?" I ask dizzy.

"Being fearless, beautiful and so *unapproachable*," he says, kissing me on the lips tenderly.

I take a deep breath. I'm definitely in paradise, but the monster is still lurking over me. Gray, wild screaming as if in pain as he looks at us. Alexander's lips are so careful with their movements. He doesn't want to scare me even though it's a very difficult task. It's my first kiss and I don't know how I should react. I look terrified at the monster as he makes a dive in pursuit of us. I take a breath and move away from Alexander's grip.

"Don't... just look at me," he says, touching my chin, turning my gaze on him. But I can't. The hurricane takes shape, and its yellow eyes magnetize me.

"Only me," Alexander says again, touching my cheek. He has knelt before me, and his eyes are sending pleading signals towards me.

"You know that night when I told you were unapproachable—" he starts to say and my gaze is now completely focused on him.

"It was my stupidity. I scared you and you were right. It's that, I don't know how to explain it. I was terrified of my own contact with you. I didn't know how to react. What can I say. Whenever you approached me, I lost my mind. I said things that I then regretted because I saw how uncomfortable I made you feel and I apologize if I crossed the line," he says, and his forehead fills with wrinkles of concern. He is interested in my answer and he shows it in every way. Looking me in the eyes, resting one hand on mine and the other on my chin. *He lost his mind.*

"Say something," he says pleadingly.

"I don't know what to say," I say and my voice sounds hoarse. The hurricane is getting closer. Its power has now been halved but it remains a vigilant guard separating us from the outside world.

"Anything," he says, and approaches his face to mine. The hurricane as if in response slightly takes a step back. Wait a minute! I approach Alexander and the hurricane moves away again. I put my hand on his cheek and the hurricane moves as if he is taking five steps back. I look at Alexander triumphantly. His eyes shine with joy.

"Alexander?" I say blissfully.

"Yes?" he replies and smiles at me as if I gave him the nicest gift.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask him. I close my mouth with both hands. I don't know if it's an inner desire of mine or if an external force pushed me to this question, but I have a dose of doubt about my immediacy. He laughs with his heart and takes my two hands in his.

"Of course, my unapproachable queen," he replies and passes my arms over his shoulders. He puts his own around my waist and pulls me over to him. My heart beats like crazy, butterflies white like snow partying in my belly. He approaches his face near mine and caresses my nose with his. And with a sharp movement he joins his lips with mine. This time I am prepared and follow his instructions. He knows exactly what to do with all the parts of his body. I've never felt like this before in my life. His kiss is more intense than the first, and my hands find refuge in his sloppy brown hair. As he kisses me, he smiles and bites my lips tenderly. The air moves my hair and he grabs it with one hand, releasing my neck, which is not left unattended for long as his kisses cover its entire surface. Do I hear the birds singing, the river flowing happily, or is it my heart? Is a warm wind caressing my cheek or is it Alexander? I open my eyes. The sky is clear and it has begun to dawn.

"Alexander?" I say and touch his chest, stopping the course of his lips.

"What happened?" he asks me dizzy.

"Look! The sunrise," I say, pointing to the horizon. His smile is dazzling.

"The hurricane has disappeared!" I say and fly with joy.

"You made it, my queen," Alexander replies, standing up. He takes me in his arms in one fell swoop and I laugh out loud.

"We made it, *together,*" I answer and kiss him on the cheek.

Chapter 30⚘

Hot lava, diamond daggers, darkness and voices. But how did we get to this point?

My heart beats like crazy. Everyone around me is trying to defend themselves. Chaos is in front of me. The end of the world. A destroyed forest. An incredible battle. An enemy in the flesh. Shadows are mixed with cries. Gold dust becomes a hot lasso that creates scratches. Everything foreshadows the end, but we're still at the beginning. The search for winter has begun and the world will soon know the terrible truth and understand what is written of their destiny to live.

~

My breath comes out sharp as I throw pointed daggers in every direction. I can't get Adrian's bloody arm out of my head. Where is he now? Is he hurt? I am to blame for everything. I shouldn't have lured him here. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb Elli, I say to myself and throw furious lava balls.

"If you want to find the rest of the boy's body you would do well to give me what I asked of you," I hear Miedo's voice behind me. I turn abruptly and he's gone. I let out angry screams and attack any Bestias who appear in my path.

"You won't accomplish anything, my Elli. It's just that another part of his body will be lost if you continue like this," his voice is now heard to my right. I fall like a torrent on him wanting to dissolve him but he turns into smoke making me fall to the ground. His laughter makes me shudder. I hate him for everything he has done. For all that he stands for. For all those he has killed or hurt.

"You're a coward!" I shout and I don't recognize my voice. I look around in a moment of insanity. Caroline fights as I have taught her and with a fury that only she could cultivate. Daniel is at her side, saving her from reckless blows and protecting Dora with his body at the same time. She tries with her grandmother's bat to get into the battle but Daniel like a Cerberus prevents her from moving beyond his turned back. Sylvia like a true fighter throws lava balls with her bows one after another against the Bestias. Shawn and Dylan team up for the first time and take down the monsters one by one. I, on the other hand, having the stone protected in my pocket, try to think about what I should do. This battle cannot continue indefinitely. I need to find a solution.

"Tick tock. Time passes," Miedo says playfully next to my right ear.

"Your friend just lost an eye" he says in my left ear. I do not react, I do not move my eyelids either. He wants to infuriate me, lose my temper and make the wrong decision. I won't do him a favor. Gather yourself Elli. Cries of pain can be heard everywhere. It's all an illusion. I close my eyes.

"You are right to be afraid. Fear is an ally, but it depends on the perspective you see it," he says, and now stands before me like a fog in the chaos he has created. He lost an eye? Like the dead boy on the roof. Fear? I must have courage, not fear. More screams. I grimace at the idea that someone has been injured right now.

"Well done. It is not worth more people to die because of a stubbornness. What do you think?" he says with feigned sweetness. More? Could it be that Adrian is... is already dead? In an instant I make my decision.

"Okay," I say and open my eyes. A black fog forms in front of me and slowly takes on human form.

"I'm so glad you made the right decision," he replies and opens his monstrous palm. "Give me the stone," he adds greedily.

"On one condition," I answer him and smile slyly.

"You're not in a position to set conditions," he says and bares his fangs.

"And yet I am," I answer and take the stone out of my pocket. I pass my palm over it and eliminate the protection sphere.

"I can break it, just like that," I say, and lower my hand furiously.

"Don't, what are you doing?" he says, taking a desperate step forward. I walk away from him and smile. At least I have his attention.

"You're bluffing. You would never break the stone. Only with it and the rest you can get out of the forest and bring back the winter. You need it," he says, taking a step forward. I take a step back.

"Try me," I tell him and create a lava ball. I feel his anger all around me gushing out like an uncontrollable torrent.

"What do you want?" he asks, and his voice completely changes tone. Now it fits more with his form.

"First of all, gather up your animals," I say, and shake my head toward the side of the Bestias. Caroline is at Dora's side who heals a wound on her cheek with Daniel becoming their bodyguard. Sylvia, visibly tired, tries to find a place to escape and looks around in horror as her bows dwindle. Shawn is not next to or near a water element so he can't create his armor and his clothes have been halved. Instead, Dylan is still vigorously trying to repel the Bestias' big punches. I again make a sharp movement ready to destroy the stone in every way. I know that if my plan does not succeed we are doomed.

"OK," he shouts, and with a flick of his hand the Bestias turn into smoke.

"RUN," I shout at the same time, and everyone listening to my advice runs towards the forest. Except for Shawn. Why? Why is he so stubborn?

"Take me to him and the stone is yours," I tell him and nod to Shawn to stop. He, acting as if he does not understand what I am asking of him, is slowly approaching the point where we are.

"I'm going to change the terms of the game a bit," he replies, and in seconds he's at Shawn's side, holding him by the throat.

"No!" I say and raise my hands in a sign of compromise. Shawn jerks as he tries to breathe.

"Stop, I'll do whatever you want," I answer terrified. He leaves Shawn furiously on the ground and looks at me intensely with his yellow eyes.

"Elli, go away, you can," Shawn tries to say, holding his throat. I turn my gaze on him.

"If you love me even a little, go away," I tell him urgently.

"Don't do this to me," he says pleadingly.

"If the drama is over, it's time to pick up my gifts," says Miedo and approaches me.

"What do you mean by your *gifts*?" I ask him, trembling at the idea of what else he might ask for.

"Because I'm in a good mood today I'll take you to see the boy but this time in addition to the stone I'll also hold you," he says, and grabs my arm violently.

"Elli?" shouts Shawn with eyes full of horror.

Before I can utter a word, his beautiful face disappears from my sight and I penetrate into a black tornado of trees, animals and soil. I didn't even have time to say goodbye to him, to kiss him goodbye. My tears do not have time to run down my face as the wind drives them away from me. *Pang*, everything calms down and I fall heavily on the hard ground.

"Welcome," I hear a familiar voice next to me. I lift my gaze and see Adrian smiling at me. His face is intact but as I lower my gaze scanning his whole body my eyes are tingling with tears that are ready to run. His right hand is *completely* missing and his blouse is bloodied and torn at that very point.

"You came just in time. This monster here was about to take my eye," he says, and his gaze darkens. Around us a cage hinders my movements (it's exactly the same as the one I found myself in last time) and so I stay on my knees next to him looking at him with wide eyes. Panic overwhelms me.

"Don't be afraid I'm not going to hurt you," Adrian says, though his eyes express something else.

"I, on the other hand, will," Miedo's voice is heard as he pulls my hand violently against the bars.

"What... what are you going to do?" I say tremblingly.

"Don't be afraid you won't have the same ending as your friend," he replies and laughs out loud.

"Leave her!" Adrian says, approaching the bars.

"I advise you to get away from the bars because you're going to get dirty," says Miedo, and he strips his canines, plunging them into my wrist. My scream makes the Kuervos fly away and my heart loses a beat. Miedo walks away smiling as my blood runs over his chin.

"Thank you for that. Too bad you won't be present at my grand exit," he says, smiling broadly, holding the Lumina stone in one hand and the bottle of my blood in the other. His laughter suddenly reverberates throughout the forest. I am not feeling well and my eyes suddenly close. A hand hugs my body before I fall to the ground and my head rests on Adrian's chest.

"I'm sorry," I say softly before the nightmare, the black night, the remorse that will drown me as soon as I wake up, take me in their arms. But I don't care because this hug is *so* warm... For the time being.

Vocabulario – Vocabulary – Λεξιλόγιο

Universo- Universe- Σύμπαν

Luminosos- Luminous- Φωτεινοί

Oscuros- Dark- Σκοτεινοί

Grisáceos- Grayish- Γκριζωποί

Rubicundos- Ruddy- Κοκκινωποί

Agua- Water- Νερό

Sol- Sun- Ήλιος

Brillar- Sparkle- Λάμψη

Piedra- Rock- Πέτρα

Diamante- Diamond- Διαμάντι

Pequeña- Small- Μικρή

Pelicanos rosados- Pink pelicans- Ροζ πελεκάνοι

Pirañas- Piranhas- Πιράνχας

Helada- Frost- Παγωνιά (In Spanish is pronounced eh-lah-dah like Greece in greek which is used metaphorically in the book. -Στα Ισπανικά διαβάζεται σαν την Ελλάδα δηλαδή ε-λα-δα και χρησιμοποιείται μεταφορικά στο βιβλίο.)

Cuervos- Ravens- Κοράκια

Perros- Dogs- Σκυλιά

Universidad- University- Πανεπιστήμιο

Tortilla- Mexican pie- Μεξικάνικη πίτα

Leche frita- Milk pie- Γαλατόπιτα

Jamon- Sausage- Λουκάνικο

Churros- Churros- Τσούρος (Είναι σαν λουκουμάδες)

Bestias- Beasts- Τέρατα

Miedo-Fear- Φόβος

Bosque- Forest- Δάσος

Ratón- Mouse- Ποντίκι

Erizos- Hedgehogs- Σκαντζόχοιροι

Oh Dios mío- Oh my God- Ωχ Θεέ μου

Buenas noches- Good night- Καληνύχτα

Ari ven aquí ahora- Mars come here now- Άρη έλα εδώ τώρα

Lágrima Mágica- Magic cry- Μαγικό δάκρυ

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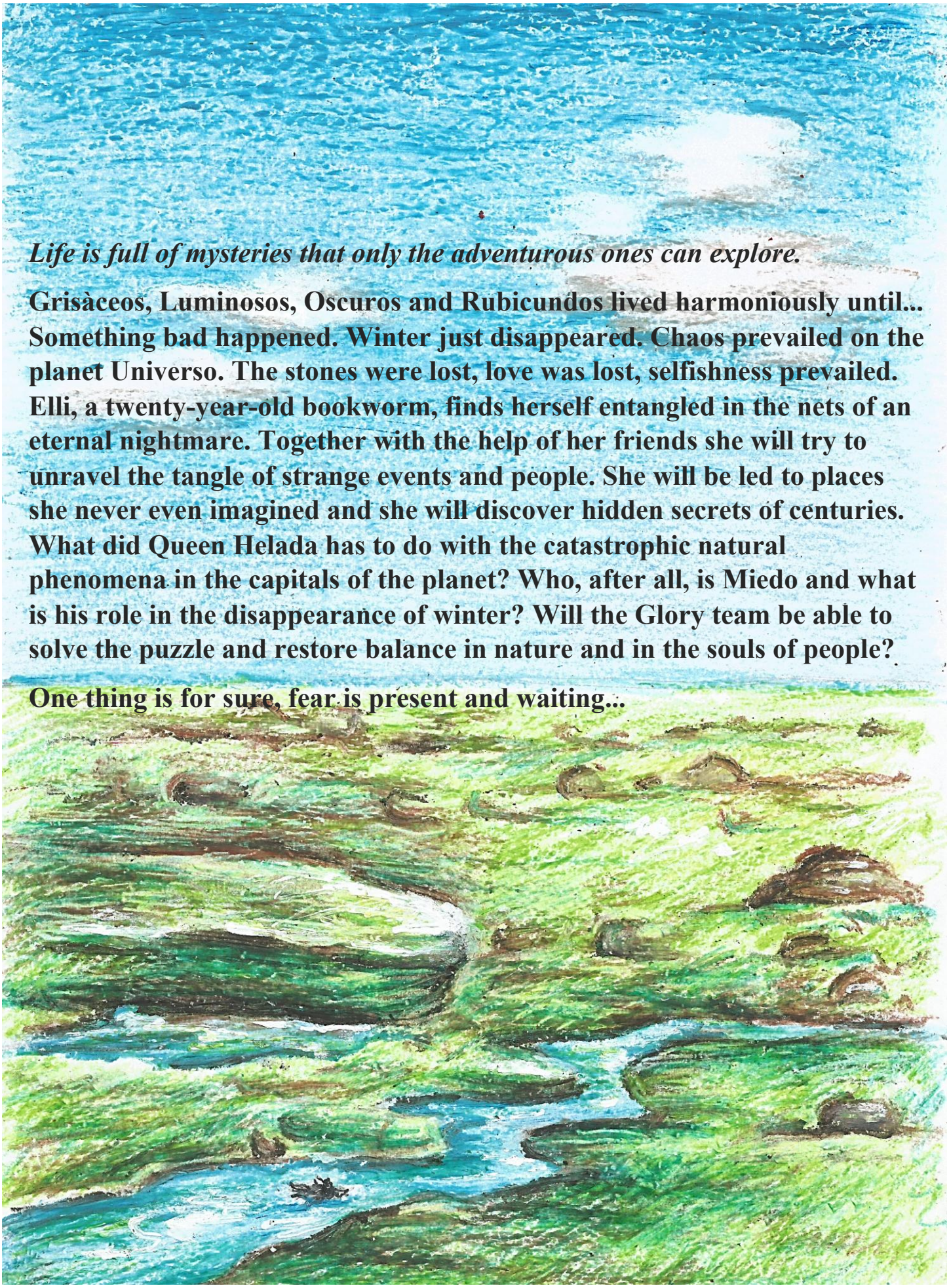

Life is full of mysteries that only the adventurous ones can explore.

Grisàceos, Luminosos, Oscuros and Rubicundos lived harmoniously until... Something bad happened. Winter just disappeared. Chaos prevailed on the planet Universo. The stones were lost, love was lost, selfishness prevailed. Elli, a twenty-year-old bookworm, finds herself entangled in the nets of an eternal nightmare. Together with the help of her friends she will try to unravel the tangle of strange events and people. She will be led to places she never even imagined and she will discover hidden secrets of centuries. What did Queen Helada has to do with the catastrophic natural phenomena in the capitals of the planet? Who, after all, is Miedo and what is his role in the disappearance of winter? Will the Glory team be able to solve the puzzle and restore balance in nature and in the souls of people?

One thing is for sure, fear is present and waiting...